

5 Detective NOVELS

Magazine

25¢ SUMMER



FEATURING

MEAT OF THE MURDER
By DONN MULLALLY

DANCE, PRETTY MAIDEN
By JOHN KNOX

THIS WILL SLAY YOU
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HE'S IN THE DEATH HOUSE
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THE GHOST BREAKERS
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5 Detective NOVELS

Magazine

SUMMER, 1952

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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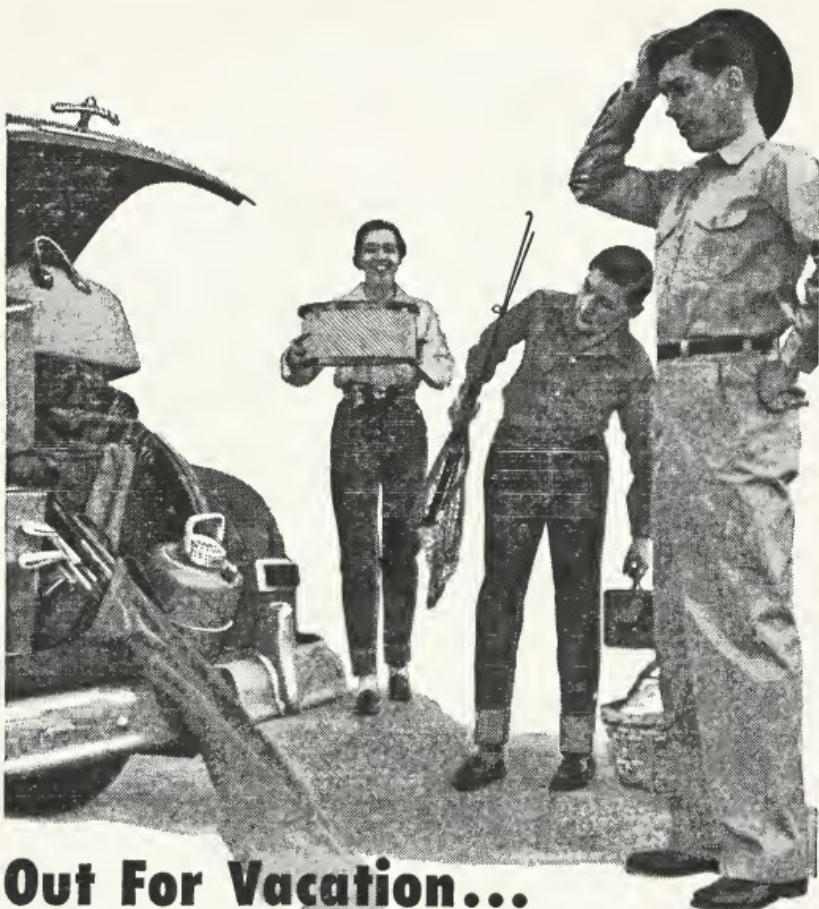
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the LOWDOWN

ON HOW TO HANDLE COPS



THE police are not always right. Sometimes they are in the wrong, and in their wake are left resentful citizens who say their rights have been trampled on. When this happens it is often due to the fact that these citizens did not know their rights or lacked the necessary courage to stand up for them.

An elementary fact you should keep in mind is that no law officer can arrest you unless he has a warrant, which he must show, naming or charging you with violating a law.

There are but two exceptions to this: A policeman can arrest you without a warrant if you have broken a law in the officer's presence; or when someone makes a statement to the officer that you were seen committing an illegal act.

Of course, you may be *apprehended* or *seized* on suspicion, which does not constitute arrest, and no charge can be filed against you. Also, you cannot be held in jail on mere suspicion.

Police Station Not a Law Court

If you are arrested, you can be held in jail only as long as it will take the arresting officer to make out a complaint against you or take you before a judge. When a major crime has been committed, which would make necessary your detention in jail, you have the right to contact an attorney of your choice.

In the meantime, you should remember that a police station is not a law court. The police cannot force you to talk or answer their questions, or make you sign anything. You cannot be cited for contempt of court for refusing to

answer questions in a police station!

Worthy of note, however, is the fact that the one great disadvantage of this is that it favors the drunken driver. The police may apprehend him on the scene of his crime, but they cannot give him a sober-or-drunk test unless he consents to it. Consequently, there are now undoubtedly many behind-the-wheel killers at large who might otherwise have been convicted.

A fact not known by enough people is that the notorious third degree is illegal. While the third degree may have its advantages in cases where desperate criminals are concerned, it could well have been left back in the Dark Ages so far as the average citizen is concerned.

Don't Sign Your Name

In passing it might be well to caution you about the difference between making a statement and merely explaining your position when dealing with the cops. The chances are that nothing serious will follow if you just explain your position in a matter at issue to an officer.

But making a statement and signing your name to it is an entirely different thing in the eyes of the law. It can easily entangle you later with the police; and it'll be still more serious if your statement was made against another citizen.

Someone has remarked wisely that it is quite as necessary to select a good lawyer before the need arises as it is an undertaker. You never can know how soon the day might come when you will need the services of a good attorney.

(Continued on page 8)



KNOWLEDGE
THAT HAS
ENDURED WITH THE
PYRAMIDS

A SECRET METHOD FOR THE MASTERY OF LIFE

WHENCE came the knowledge that built the Pyramids and the mighty Temples of the Pharaohs? Civilization began in the Nile Valley centuries ago. Where did its first builders acquire their astounding wisdom that started man on his upward climb? Beginning with naught they overcame nature's forces and gave the world its first sciences and arts. Did their knowledge come from a race now submerged beneath the sea, or were they touched with Infinite inspiration? From what concealed source came the wisdom that produced such characters as Amenhotep IV, Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, and a host of others? Today it is known that they discovered and learned to interpret certain *Secret Methods* for the development of their inner power of mind. They learned to command the inner forces within their own beings, and to master life. This secret art of living has been preserved and handed down throughout the ages. Today it is extended to those who dare to use its profound principles to meet and solve the problems of life in these complex times.

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THE LOWDOWN

(Continued from page 6)

In the same category as the ambulance hound is the shyster who, like the sly fox he is, stalks down the jail corridor to your cell to see if he can get some money out of you on the pretense of helping you out of your trouble. He will have as little charity for you as his



namesake in the wild. So when this fox puts in his appearance, act accordingly.

To clinch the shyster angle, it may surprise you to know that the fellow probably learned first of your predicament from the police. You will then have even more reason to beware of him, because he may well have a stake in the cops, and as a return favor to them for their tip-off about you, will betray you to them!

Play safe by getting an attorney of your own choice. In this, your friends can often be of help to you.

Get a Good Lawyer

Another important thing to keep in mind is that regardless of the nature or circumstances of the charge placed against you, you have the right to a trial by jury, unless, of course, you chose to be tried otherwise. As defendant, you can not be compelled to testify unless you wish to do so.

It is here that the services of a reputable barrister of your own choice will be of the greatest value to you. As your attorney he will not only advise you but will see that your rights and privileges

are respected as the law allows.

If it is possible for you to obtain bail, he will help you with that. He will also provide you with a copy of the complaint or charge against you before the trial. He will interview your witnesses and see that they appear in court on the day of your trial.

Beware the Public Defender!

What if you haven't the money to hire an attorney? Then the judge who is to hear the case must appoint one for you —without cost. This brings us to the Public Defenders. Keep away from them, for they can give you an even worse deal than a shyster would.

Remember that you can not be forced to accept a Public Defender's services. There have been instances where, seeking to further his own selfish interests, a Public Defender has thought nothing of delivering a client-victim right into the hands of the prosecution. There is more than one person languishing in prison who could testify to a P. D.'s black treachery. Of course not all P. D.'s are dishonest, any more than all policemen are grafters.

A last thing you should know is that if you are reasonably sure the police have done you a rank injustice, policemen are not exempt from criminal prosecution. But here, it is well to have a



reliable attorney to chart the way for you. About all that can be said here is that experience seems to bear out the fact that it is better to seek redress through civil action than by criminal prosecution.

—Wm. P. Schramm

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HUNTING HAWK MISSES HIS KILL BUT THEN...



JUST FOR LAUGHS



IN CHATTANOOGA, a thief snatched the purse of Miss Joan Nash on a city street, but had to do a strip tease to escape. Miss Nash grabbed him by the coat and screamed. He eluded her grasp by slipping out of his coat. Then she grabbed him by his trousers. Pants-less but panting, he went scooting down the street.

VISITING ROME, French Police Chief Georges Mongredien became so interested in the display of some red-hot bathing beauties that his pocket was picked of a large sum of money while he stared.

IN OAKLAND, CALIF., an ex-convict confessed to a robbery, explaining he wanted to return to San Quentin prison "to escape the high cost of living."

IN SINGAPORE, MALAYSIA, two attractive hostesses of the Happy Cabaret quarreled over a boy friend and challenged each other to a duel. It was an affair of honor, conducted with beer bottles as weapons, and they fought until one girl was conked out cold and taken to the hospital.

DEPUTY SHERIFFS at Amarillo, Tex., turned down the request of a prisoner in jail. He wanted his soup warmed twice.

IN FRANKFURT, GERMANY, Police Chief Willi Klapproth, after having spent the year before studying U. S. police methods over here, was arrested on charges of bribery, perjury and accepting kickbacks.

THE INSTALLATION of television is credited with cutting down the number of prison escapes at Raleigh, N. C.

LOS ANGELES POLICE have been looking for a burglar with a powerful yen for fish—or a lot of mosquito trouble. He broke into the City Health department's pest control division and made off with 1000 Gamibia Affinis, mosquito-eating fish.

IT HAS COME TO LIGHT it's against the law to carry a skeleton into a tenement house.

AT THE DEDICATION of the new Pennington Gap, Va., jail, the first workman on the building over-celebrated—and became its first inmate.

IN MIAMI, a thief stole 272 watches from a salesman's car, but the crook is apt to be disappointed. Not a one will tell time. They're all dummies, without inside works.

AT GRAND PRAIRIE, TEX., Police Commissioner John Daugherty sat down to his lunch in a cafe and started crying. The horrified waitress wanted to know if the food was that bad. It turned out, though, that the trouble was that a tear-gas bomb the Commiss had been carrying was leaking.

ALL A CITIZEN of Grand Rapids, Mich., had to do to refute a charge that he'd bitten a policeman was to open his mouth to the judge. The defendant was toothless.

B. E. BALDWIN, Richmond, Va., complained to police that an intruder who broke into his home not only drank up all the beer in his icebox, but took a nap in his bed.

A Novel by DONN MULLALLY

MEAT



She said, "Slide
over, darling."

of the MURDER

Ted's wife was far from a saint, and so was the hot blonde he

was cheating with—but did it add up to a cold-blooded kill?



I

TEDE OWEN felt very Christian about getting home before midnight, even a couple of minutes before. The party he'd left down at the Palace Hotel was just beginning to roll; some big wheels from the main office of the Crest Meat Company in Chicago were in town for business meetings with their San Francisco personnel. Naturally, big wheels can't turn without a certain amount of oil.

Ted had sneaked out before the going got rough, but not because he was a slave to any scruples against drinking seven-year-old bourbon. He'd seen too many bright young men burned at company parties. A little too much to drink, a little too much confidence, and a hell of a lot too much conversation.

Ted left his car on the street with the windows

rolled up and locked. He didn't want to drive into the basement garage. If it was possible to get in the house without waking Betty, he was in favor of that. She had a talent for being miserable when he came in with liquor only on his breath. He didn't have to fall over the threshold or crawl in on his hands and knees. Betty meant well, but she suffered from an urge to make him a better man than he was, a better man than comes in the stock-model husband. Ted let himself into the house as quietly as he could, tiptoed upstairs in the dark.

As his eyes came level with the floor of the hall, he saw it was wasted effort. There was a light under Betty's door. She'd be sitting up in bed with a magazine, smoking a chain, poised to tear him apart. Any second now, her shrill, angry voice would challenge him.

A board groaned under his weight. "That ought to do it," he sighed to himself. "I might as well kick in her door and be done with it."

He settled for drumming lightly with the tips of his fingers, said, "Are you awake, Betty?"

There was no sound from her room. The door wasn't latched; it opened under his touch, slowly.

The room was lighted by twin lamps on either side of Betty's huge, Hollywood bed with its pink brocade headboard. Ted's first thought was that he'd startled her. Betty sat bolt upright in the bed, her eyes bulging, jaw hanging open.

"What's the matter, honey? Didn't you hear me come in?" he asked, forcing a smile.

She didn't move, didn't acknowledge him in any way.

"It's me, Ted," he added, stepping out of the dark hall. "I—"

There was something around her throat, almost buried in the crepey flesh under her chin. He hadn't been able to see it from the door. He could make out a knot just below her ear and the empty foot of a nylon stocking.

"Betty, what—" He froze where he was, trying not to accept what he saw. Betty's unchanging, rigid expression, her terror-struck eyes, bulging and glassy—and dead. The blueness of her mouth.

Ted drove himself to the side of the bed, touched her hand. It was cold, lifeless, heavy on the coverlet. He felt her throat above that twisted nylon noose. There was no pulse. She had been garroted with one of her own stockings. That was the meat of it. Murdered—Betty had been murdered.

Ted's eyes were hot, dry; his throat tight. His body felt light, suspended, as though his legs didn't quite reach the floor. He had to hold onto himself, he realized dimly, go downstairs to the telephone in the hall.

The instrument was in his hand and he was dialing before he remembered Steve. Ted dropped the phone back in its cradle. He had to do something about Steve.

Ted turned on the basement light and ran down the steps to Steve's room. It was small and a little short on view, but it gave Steve a place to stay and a lot of privacy. After five years at different military hospitals, Steve had said, "Fella, I can live in a clothes closet as long as it's my exclusive place." The room wasn't that bad.

IT HAD been originally intended for servants' use and had a private bath. The furnishings were as good as anything else in the house; they'd brought most of the things from upstairs when they learned Steve could leave Letterman Hospital.

Ted knocked on the door, heard Steve groan, "Yeah. Who is it?"

"Ted," he replied. "Can I come in?" Steve Milner rumbled sleepily, "Wait'll I turn on a light."

Steve was sitting up in bed, trying to adjust his eyes to the sudden brightness of the reading lamp. He was a powerfully built man with thick, loose-hung shoulders that were covered with kinky black hair. His naturally dark skin had turned walnut from working around Ted's yard with his shirt off. Steve had blue-black hair and small, deep-set blue eyes; heavy, black brows.

"What cooks, Pappy?" he grinned at Ted. "Mama kick you downstairs?"

Ted shook his head. "No," he said bleakly. "I just came in—found Betty."

"Found her?" said Steve with another smile. "Was she lost?"

"She's dead, Steve. Someone—someone broke into her room. Strangled her with a stocking."

"No!" gasped Steve. "Ted, I've been down here all night. Turned in early. I didn't hear a thing!"

"You wouldn't, necessarily," Owen nodded. "They could've forced a window on the other side of the house, crept up to Elizabeth's room. If there was a struggle, I doubt that any sound would have carried down here."

"What are you going to do, Ted?" asked Steve. "Have you called the cops?"

"Not yet," Ted replied. "First, I thought we'd better take care of you."

"What do you mean?"

"You can't be here when the cops come."

"Why not, Ted? My conscience is clear," Steve declared.

"Of course it is," nodded Ted Owen. "You went to bed early. I believe that, certainly. But it'll be a little hard to prove. You had access to the house, and—"

"Yeah, I know," Steve stated bitterly. "I know what you're going to say—and I've got a mental history. I'm a screwball, a nut. Maybe the cops'll think I flipped my lid."

"They might," Ted agreed. "So we have to get you out of here. At least, temporarily, until—"

"Won't I look guilty as hell?" scowled Steve. "I mean, being on the lam?"

"Maybe," conceded Ted. "But we'll gain time for the real killer to be found. If you're on the premises, the cops simply won't look any further."

"Okay, Ted, if you say so." Steve threw his legs over the side of the bed and reached for his pants. "Do you have any idea where I'm supposed to go?" he asked.

"I've been thinking about that, and my best hunch is my place at Boulder Creek. The cabin is isolated enough. Nobody ought to bother you. You'll find some supplies there, and I'll try to come down with more stuff as soon as possible."

"How do I go?" Steve was buttoning his shirt. "Boulder Creek's a long walk."

"A friend of mine will drive you. I'll call her, tell her to pick you up at the

corner of Broadway and Columbus. You can take a bus that far."

"How'll I know her?"

"She's a blonde and she'll be driving a blue Olds convertible. Be on the northeast corner."

"What'll you do then?" asked Steve. "Call the cops?"

"I'll have to," said Ted. "But I can stall long enough to give you and Loreen—Miss Tobey—time to get safely out of town. As soon as you're ready to go," he added, "come upstairs and get the keys to the cabin."

"I'm with you right now," said Steve, shrugging his heavy shoulders into a corduroy jacket.

II

INСПЕКТОР MALOTTE of homicide was an eager, aggressive young guy. He dressed as though he sold something, maybe men's furnishings. Not flashy or loud, but Ted was aware of his clothes before he settled anything in his mind about the man wearing them.

Malotte knew his job, ran his investigation with disarming ease. His questions sounded too simple, his round face looked too bland, when he asked them.

Ted could see most of the booby traps coming and got around them. But it took footwork. He had shown Malotte the body, told him how he'd found it, and explained how he'd spent his evening prior to coming home.

"You won't mind if I check with some of the people at that party, will you, Mr. Owen?" smiled Malotte.

"Of course not," Ted said. He gave the detective a partial list of the men present. "The others were from our Chicago office," he explained, "and I doubt if they paid any particular attention to when I left."

"I think we have enough here," said Malotte. "There's really no question in my mind about your story. This is merely routine," he added with a flash of teeth. "The doc tells me Mrs. Owen was killed at least three hours before you got home, which places the time of death around nine o'clock. There's only one thing I don't understand, Mr. Owen."

"It was obviously a job. Your wife wasn't murdered for her money or jew-

els. The killer simply walked upstairs, entered her room, probably with a gun, which kept her in line until he could slip the garrote around her neck. I wonder if you have any thoughts about people who might have a reason to kill your wife?"

"I'm afraid I don't, Inspector," Ted answered. "Elizabeth was far from being a saint, but—"

"But," the inspector finished for him, "you don't think she made enemies who would set out to strangle her cold-bloodedly."

Ted shook his head. "No."

"When we first got here," Malotte said, changing his attack abruptly, "I asked you if someone else lived in the house. You told me a cousin roomed in the basement?"

"Yes," answered Ted. "My second cousin, Steve Milner."

"Been living with you long?" the detective wanted to know.

"Four or five months."

"Did he get along with your wife?"

"As near as I can tell," replied Ted. "He helped her a lot around the house, took care of the yard for us."

"Is there any reason why he did that kind of work, Mr. Owen. I mean, couldn't he hold a regular job?"

"He isn't ready for a job," Ted shot back defensively. "He came to us straight from the hospital. You'll find this out anyway, so I might as well tell you. Steve was a mental case. Until a few months ago, he was still fighting the Japs."

"How come you're looking out for him, Mr. Owen?" asked Malotte. "You say he's your second cousin. That's not a very close relationship."

"Steve dragged me back from Bloody Nose Ridge on Palau," Ted remarked grimly. "We were in the same outfit—the 81st. Drafted together. He saw me get it. A rifle shot in the chest. Steve pulled me out of there. I was through with the war. Steve stayed in, made one invasion too many."

His eyes felt hot. He was nearer to crying than he'd been all evening when he finished. He blurted, "That close enough for you, Inspector?"

"It'll do," Inspector Malotte said quietly. "But look, Owen. You told me

when you found your wife's body, you checked on Steve. He wasn't in his room. Do you know where he might be. I'd like to talk to him."

"I haven't the foggiest notion. I thought maybe he'd gone to a movie, a double feature. But—" Ted glanced at his watch. It was one-thirty. He shrugged—"I guess it's too late for that now."

"You don't think he could've—" Inspector Malotte indicated Elizabeth's room upstairs with a motion of his head.

"I am positive he didn't," stated Ted. "Positive."

"He was a psycho," Malotte reminded him.

Ted Owen nodded. "Yeah. But he never was violent, Inspector. Just the opposite. He'd have periods when he'd be perfectly normal; then something would snap, and he'd try to hide under things, the bed or a table. He thought he was being strafed."

"Isn't there a chance he'd turn aggressive?" asked the detective.

"You'll have to talk to his doctor for an opinion on that," Ted told him.

"Thanks," said Inspector Malotte. "I intend to. What's the doctor's name?"

Ted gave it to him.

"Okay," said Malotte, closing his pocket notebook. "I believe the situation's covered. If Steve should return," he added, walking to the door, "get in touch with me. In the meantime, we'll see if we can pick him up."

"Look, Inspector," Ted remarked as Malotte reached the door, "this may sound a little strange coming from me—but if your men contact Steve, do me a favor. Don't let them push him around. I don't think it'd do him any good, and it might set him back."

"We'll give Steve every break we can," Malotte promised.

Ted watched the homicide inspector jog down the front steps and climb in a car. Standing in the lighted doorway, he felt suddenly very alone. The house was quiet, empty. Elizabeth's body had been taken away; the police technicians had finished their work and were gone as were the reporters, the ambulance men. All the confusion had stopped in the hollow note of the door's closing. The sound still echoed in the quiet hallway,

Every light in the house was turned on. Ted started methodically to turn them off—stopped. It was better with them on.

He went to the living room, took a bottle of bourbon out of the liquor cabinet, and poured himself a drink. It burned, going down, burned like the truth. If his marriage with Elizabeth had become a progressive tyranny, it had been partly his fault. Mostly his fault. He hadn't been a very right guy.

There had been other women—waitresses, stenographers—hell, even the farmer's daughter. He'd been a traveling salesman, hadn't he? Hit and run stuff when he couldn't face the emptiness of a country hotel room. Then Loreen, the girl at the office. A steady thing, a big thing—love and larceny. He wondered if Elizabeth had ever had another guy. He hoped she had. It would make him look better. Why kid himself?

The living room was like a squirrel cage to Ted as he paced back and forth, tormenting himself. What he should have done—what he should have been—

He stopped walking, began a systematic search of the house. He supposed he was looking for a clue, although he probably wouldn't know one if it fastened itself on his throat. Besides, the police had been all over this—trained men, experts, scientists. What could they miss, that a little wholesale meat salesman would pick up? The whole business was a waste of time.

Which made it important to Ted Owen. He had to waste time.

TEDE wandered listlessly into his study, sat down behind the desk. He pulled out the top drawer and began pawing around in the jungle of stuff in it. Pencils with broken points, fountain pens with bent nibs, sprained paper clips, old envelopes, grocery lists. A nearly empty bottle of purple ink. Elizabeth had been partial to purple ink.

The other drawers were pretty much the same. He found exactly what he had expected—nothing.

In the bottom drawer, he kept a steel file box for his canceled checks. He hadn't opened it since the first of the month, when he had balanced the bank

statement. He thumbed the catch and flipped the metal lid back. It was empty; the cardboard dividers lay flat on the bottom of the box.

Ted stared at the empty file for several minutes. What was it all about? Who would be interested in his canceled checks and old bank statements?

He closed the box finally, slid the drawer shut, and stood up. He had been using that file for years, and no one had ever touched it before.

No one had ever strangled Elizabeth before, either.

Ted went up to her room. If it had seemed strange to him to see this room choked with policemen and police technicians, it was stranger now. The room and Elizabeth had been so completely identified it was almost as though Ted had walked into a room where he'd never been before. The ambulance attendants had stripped the bed when they came for Elizabeth, and Ted imagined he could still see the hollow her body had made in the mattress.

Ted shook himself. He wasn't there to wallow in nostalgia. He crossed the room to Elizabeth's dresser, went through each of its drawers; moved on to the closet, the hat boxes on the shelf. In each place, he drew a blank.

Beside the bed, there was a bulging, bandy-legged, French period night table. It had a cabinet space in it. The door to the cabinet was locked. He didn't want to break into it. If Malotte happened to come back and noticed that the cabinet had been tampered with, it would be just a little tough to explain.

Ted knew for sure that Elizabeth hadn't had the key with her when she was taken from the room. He tried the dresser again, the glove box. Elizabeth had had a theory that no one ever looked for anything valuable in the fingers of gloves. He had known her to hide considerable amounts of money in them, folded flat.

He made a fine haul now—about a hundred dollars in twenties, in addition to the small, engraved key he was looking for.

The cabinet paid off, too. At least as well as three oranges on a slot machine. His canceled checks and bank statements were there. Five years of them,

wrapped in a piece of yellow, ruled note paper on which Elizabeth had painfully scratched a column of figures which he took to represent the checks it contained. He turned the package thoughtfully, glanced at the total. It came to a little over seventy-five thousand dollars. That much money had passed through his hands in the last five years, his hands and Elizabeth's. She'd poured her share down the drain.

What was Elizabeth trying to prove? Even when "her share" had amounted to more than he was supposed to make, she had never questioned the source of the money.

He put the package under his arm, turned out the lights, and crossed the hall to his own room. He thought he'd lie down for a bit. He didn't expect to go to sleep or come up with any answers.

He was at least half right. There were no answers, even in Elizabeth's unexpected interest in their finances. She'd have had no way of finding out how he and Loreen had been milking the meat company. There had never been a whisper of suspicion, not even from the home-office auditors. But suppose she had found out every detail of the swindle, how would that figure in her death?

Ted was asking himself this when sleep closed in.

III

WHEN the doorbell woke Ted, the sun was slanting in his bedroom window. He made a big effort, dragged himself off the bed, and stumbled downstairs to the front door. He supposed Malotte had come back to go over the place in daylight and, incidentally, to ask a few more loaded questions. Ted opened the door.

It wasn't Malotte but a younger, sharper-faced, blond man. He had on sport clothes—tweed jacket, slacks and saddle shoes.

He said, "Good morning, Mr. Owen. May I come in?"

"I don't know," Ted replied. "What do you want?"

Ted's caller extended his hand, smiling. "I'm Dick Clay, a private investi-

gator. I'd like to talk to you." He was already in the house. Ted followed him to the living room. Mr. Clay seemed at home there.

"I read the papers this morning," he said cheerfully, then switched to a long face. "Too bad about Mrs. Owen."

Ted nodded. "Yes. Thank you."

"I was working for your wife," explained Clay easily. "So it was kind of a blow to me, too—know what I mean?"

"Working for her?" echoed Ted. "On what?"

"Why does a woman usually hire a private detective, Mr. Owen?"

Ted sat down across from Clay, studied him. "You mean," he said, "you've been shadowing me?"

"Check."

"I hope I haven't been a dull subject."

"About par for the course," Clay told him. He took a folded document from his inside coat pocket, tapped it with a fingernail. "You make fair reading," he added. "But, after the first hundred or two of these, they lose their punch."

Ted's eyes were fixed on his clenched hands in his lap. "I'm sure," he mumbled, embarrassed.

"You can look it over, if you want," Clay offered. "There's nothing that'll startle you. Just a rundown of where you and Miss Tobey from your office have been for the past couple of weeks. There's a transcript of some dialogue which took place in her apartment the other day."

"I don't care what's in the report," snapped Ted. "Why did you come here?"

Clay shrugged. "I hate to be a pest, Owen," he said, "but frankly, I haven't been paid for this report—yet."

"Tough," said Ted quietly. "You might be stuck with it. I can't imagine any use I'd have for such a thing."

"I can." Clay grinned meaningfully. "I didn't come here to blackmail you, Mr. Owen. The price on this epic is the same as it always was. At fifty bucks a day, it represents five hundred dollars. Mrs. Owen advanced me two and a half. I'll settle for the balance. You're getting the bargain of your life. As long as I'm paid in full, I consider the information privileged. Otherwise, it goes to the cops."

"I thought you said you didn't come

here to blackmail me."

"Right. If this were blackmail, I wouldn't sell for a lousy two hundred and fifty. I'd take every nickel you've got or could raise."

Ted shook his head slowly. "What makes your report so important, Clay? There's certainly no divorce action pending now."

"Are you being thick on purpose," asked Clay, "or don't you really know what would happen if the police had my report?"

TEDE fumbled for his answer. Clay stopped him by holding up a hand. "You'd be booked for murder—pronto." "Elizabeth's murder?" gasped Ted. "You believe I killed my wife?"

"I don't believe anything, Mr. Owen," said Clay, rising to his feet. "But I know you'll have a rugged time proving you didn't at least arrange to have her strangled, unless the police find your boy Milner and can hang the kill on him. Once I give them this love story—" he waved his report at Ted—"they'll

have you nailed with a motive. And if anything has happened to Steve Milner, it won't take any genius cop to figure you arranged Milner's release from the psycho ward so he could stand patsy for your wife's death. All they need is right here." He put the report back in his pocket, slapped it confidently. "So long, Mr. Owen," he added, starting toward the door.

Ted stopped him. "Wait a minute," he said. "I'm not buying that report, even if you knock it down to fifty bucks."

"I wasn't about to," leered Clay.

"If I'm innocent, it's not worth a nickel to me," Ted went on. "If I'd killed Elizabeth, you'd be able to name your price. I'm not buying it, so you can draw any conclusions you want from that."

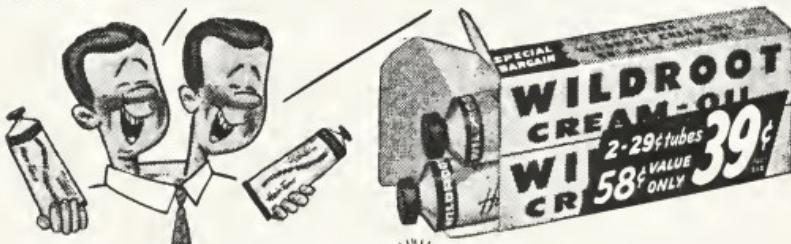
"I told you my conclusions, Mr. Owen," Clay stated levelly. "You're passing up a good thing."

"Let's forget the report," Ted said. "I want to talk about Milner. I think I

[Turn page]

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know where he is."

Clay sat down again on the arm of the chair. "That's jolly, Mr. Owen. You'd better tell the cops immediately."

Ted shook his head, his face grave. "No, No, I don't think so, Clay. I'm not sure how Steve would react to the police charging in there with drawn guns and tear gas. It might wreck all the good work which's been done with him. Steve was never dangerous, but when he had one of his fits, he talked wild. Some police officer is apt to go trigger-happy. I want to bring Steve in myself."

"Is anyone holding you?"

"No," replied Ted. "But I think it would be better if someone was with me, who had an official standing. I don't want to give the police the idea I'm pulling Steve out of a hat. You said you worked for fifty dollars a day. All right, you're hired, if you want the job."

"I'll take it," Clay said without hesitation. "What's your hunch on Steve?"

"I've been looking around the house," explained Ted. "I seem to be missing the keys to my cabin down at Boulder Creek. They usually hang on a hook in the kitchen china cabinet, and I'm nearly certain I saw them there the other day."

"Why would he run off to Boulder Creek?" asked Clay.

Ted made an uncertain gesture with his hands. "I don't know what happened here last night," he said. "It's possible, I think, that Steve was asleep in the basement, heard some unusual sound upstairs, came to investigate, and just missed the killer. But he saw Betty and was frightened. Steve couldn't help being sensitive about his position. He remembered the cabin, got the keys, and took off."

"How?" Clay wanted to know. "Did he have wheels—a car?"

"No. But I suppose he might have hitch-hiked. There's a bus part way. At least, I think it's worth the trip."

"I, personally, doubt it," Clay remarked. "But as long as you're paying for this outing, Mr. Owen, let's go."

IT WAS an hour's drive down the Peninsula, over Skyline Boulevard, which cuts along the ridge of the Coast Ranges all the way from San Francisco to Santa

Cruz. Boulder Creek is in the Big Basin country, surrounded by a wall of redwood-bearing foothills. The main street is the highway; there is a branch bank, a post office, a few grocery stores, gas stations, a fire house, and fifty real-estate agents.

Ted Owen's cabin was about a mile from the main and only stem of the town. The trip down had been long enough for Ted to fill Dick Clay in on how he felt about Steve Milner—the times they'd had it good in the army; and when it smelled, which was mostly. He'd found out that Clay had been with an outfit that had trained in Louisiana and on the New Mexico desert, too. Clay was really a pretty good guy, Ted decided, as they were turning into the side road leading to Ted's cabin.

Clay said, "It's been a nice ride, Ted, and I hope we find your cousin—for your sake. I hope you're right about him, all the way."

Down among the big trees where they were driving, the shadows were cold. The air smelled damp, minty along the creek.

"I'm right about Steve," said Ted. "I'd stake my life on the guy."

"That's about what you're doing," Clay told him. "Whether you realize it or not, if Steve isn't here—if he's really blown his cork or anything's happened to him—this hassel roosts on your shoulders. And, believe me, it has long toenails."

They rode the rest of the way to the cabin in silence. As Ted set the hand-brake, he said, "Look, I'll go in alone and see if he's here. Don't worry if I'm not out right away. I may have to talk to him."

"If you need help, whistle," said Clay. "And good luck."

Ted tried the front door of the cabin. It was locked, as he'd expected it to be. He rattled the knob, called, "Steve! It's Ted."

No response from inside. The cabin wasn't so big that Steve couldn't hear if he were there. The walls were stripped redwood, and there were only two rooms and a kitchen. The windows were shuttered.

Ted made a vague, puzzled gesture for the benefit of Clay out in the car,

then opened the door with the key on his pocket chain. The rooms echoed the sound of the door opening, his first steps inside.

"Where are you, Steve?" he called. His voice bounced back at him, dead, hollow. The air in the cabin was stale, smelled of dust and leaves, faintly of fry-cooking—all very old and unchanged.

IV

A THOROUGH inspection of the cabin showed that Steve wasn't there, hadn't been there. Even in the dim light which filtered through the shutters, Ted was sure. He'd told Loreen not to call him back after she'd brought Steve down. It might tip over the whole thing. He had meant to contact her in the morning, from a public phone, but Clay's turning up had queered that.

The rug had very definitely been yanked out from under him, and there wasn't a floor to land on. If he didn't produce Steve, after all their conversation, Clay would be suspicious. The private investigator had said in the beginning that he didn't believe Steve would be produced. He thought Steve was the patsy for Elizabeth's death. He'd remarked, on the way to the cabin, "You're staking your life on Steve being here. For your sake, I hope he is."

Ted stood in the dark little bedroom of the cabin, clenching and unclenching his hands. They were sticky, hot. What if something had happened to Loreen on the road last night—an automobile accident, anything? She might be in a hospital. Steve might have wandered off, his mind blank again. There were a million possible reasons for Steve's not being there. None of them was the right answer for Ted. He had to have the right answer, because he had to sell it to Clay. It wouldn't be enough to walk out of there with a sickly grin on his face and say, "Well, I guess I was all wet. He isn't here." Ted could see Clay's leer if he were told something like that.

"All right, Mr. Owen," he'd say. "Let's stop kidding. What did you really do with Steve?"

There was no reply Ted could make,

until he'd talked to Loreen. "Look," Clay would say, "I think we'd better see Inspector Malotte. I have this report burning a hole in my pocket." Maybe Malotte would listen to reason and maybe—likely—would jail Ted on some holding charge until he thought he had enough evidence to book Ted for murder.

If anything had happened to Steve, Clay was right. Ted felt sure that something had happened to Steve, that he was, in fact, dead.

Ted's problem now was to remain free, at least until he'd spoken to Loreen.

He forced himself to walk to the door of the cabin, wave airily to the detective, who was still sitting in the car. "Will you give me a hand here, Clay?" he called.

The detective was momentarily blinded by the change of light when he stepped inside the cabin. He stopped, squinting around the living room with its furniture hooded by dust covers.

"Where is he?" he asked. "Where's Steve?"

Clay didn't see the piece of firewood in Ted's hand. It made just a dim blur before it came down on the back of his head. Clay fell to his knees, looking up at Ted, with dazed, blank eyes. Then he let go, toppled the rest of the way to the floor, spreading out in a quiet, motionless heap.

Ted dropped the piece of firewood, watched the detective for several minutes. He didn't move. Then Ted stepped over Clay's extended legs, closed the cabin door, locked it. He'd call the local fire house, once he got back to the city, have someone come and look after Clay—if the detective hadn't broken out by then.

He'd bought a little time, hoped he hadn't paid too much for it.

TEOD OWEN drove south to Santa Cruz on Monterey Bay, parked his car on a quiet residential street, and walked to the Greyhound station. He hopped a bus back to San Francisco. He didn't know how long Dick Clay would be shaking off the effects of that rap on the skull, but he guessed fifteen minutes to half an hour at the outside.

Clay wouldn't have to be a superman

to get out of the cabin, even with the door locked. The window shutters weren't built to stand a lot of pounding. Then Clay would have a mile walk to the nearest telephone. Give the San Francisco police ten minutes to clear a teletype to Sacramento—and the license number of Owen's convertible would be hot—and every cop on the Peninsula would be looking for him to pass.

Ted took no chance on being picked off in the San Francisco bus depot, either. He left the bus in South San Francisco and rode a streetcar the rest of the way to "Butcher-town," stayed on the car until it passed the Crest Meat Company plant, a large, raw brick building like the other packing houses that backed up to Hunter's Point Navy Yard.

Crest had a splashy entrance to the business office, a lot of chrome and plate-glass. It looked like a diamond choker on a dirty neck. As the streetcar rattled by, Ted saw a couple of characters stalling around on the corner. They were trying to look as though they belonged in Butchertown, but they had "cop" written on them like a government inspection stamp.

So Dick Clay had come to and kicked his way out of the cabin. All right. What, Ted asked himself, did he do now?

He had to get into the plant.

A few blocks farther down the line he dropped off the streetcar, without any firm conclusion about his next step. Ted crossed the street to a bar and squandered a nickel on a call to his office. When the switchboard operator at Crest Meat Company plugged in on the line, he gave himself a North Beach address, and asked to speak to Miss Tobey.

The girl told him Miss Tobey was at lunch and asked if there was a message.

Ted said, "No message. Thanks." He hung up, glanced at his watch. It was twelve-forty-five. He'd packed a lot into that morning, enough so it should be seam-sprung. The word that Loreen was at lunch had been welcome. At least, she hadn't been in an accident while driving Steve last night. Nothing she couldn't walk away from. There was probably some other perfectly logical explanation why Steve hadn't been in the cabin.

But Ted had to know what it was.

Loreen usually went to lunch about twelve-thirty. There were only a couple of places in the neighborhood where she'd eat—a diner down the block from where Ted had made the call, or Tony Pinta's Bar & Grill.

He walked by the diner and saw that she wasn't at the counter. That left Tony's, a quarter of a mile back the way he'd come—past the plant.

Ted waited for a streetcar, saw the two men still in front of the Crest Meat Company. The two cops.

Tony Pinta's was first a bar. In California, the law says a bar must also serve hot food, and Mrs. Pinta knew how to put together a really sensational minestrone, and her spaghetti sauce was as good as any in town. There was nothing wrong with the roast beef sandwiches, either.

Mrs. Pinta served her food in a little room behind the space reserved for the bar and shuffleboard table. There were half a dozen high, old-fashioned booths. Most of the time, Tony carried the food out himself; sometimes it was Mama.

Ted walked rapidly through the bar, hoping he wouldn't be recognized by any of the guys drinking their lunch. He wasn't. Nobody yelled at him or tried to drag him over for a quick one. Business was good for Mama Pinta.

LOREEN was in a corner booth. She wasn't alone. All Ted could see was the back of the man's neck. That's all he had to see. He knew who it was, by the deep, tanned wrinkles in the neck, the graying, brindle hair.

Bennett—the boss—manager of the San Francisco branch of the Crest Meat Company. A big, good-looking lug with a million-dollar front. He had a few bucks cash to back it up, too. A fifty-thousand-dollar home in Palo Alto, which he'd finished paying off last year, for one thing. A couple of Cadillacs, a sailing yacht. Quite a boy.

Ted slid into the booth on Loreen's side of the table, grinning. "How's the minestrone this afternoon?"

"I—I—" gasped Loreen, surprised.

"Never mind," he said. "I'll have some. And a roast beef sandwich," he added to Mama Pinta as she waddled

out of the kitchen to take his order personally.

Mama always gave Ted a little special service and today she was sympathetic about his wife. She'd read the papers. She meant well, but it was tough getting rid of her. Fortunately, no one in the place seemed to pay any attention to the fuss she made over him.

She finally went back to her kitchen, and Ted said to Loreen, "I want to talk to you."

Bennett looked up from his lunch, asked, "Shall I leave?"

Ted shook his head. "No, you might as well know about this. Loreen, what

was speaking. She was as lovely as she'd ever been, as desirable—but not to him. The sleek figure, the conformation of her body still showed beneath her Palm Beach suit. The long, graceful, beautifully kept hands. The hair still long and soft and very blond indeed. But she wasn't Ted's woman. Not as of that minute.

V

BENNETT continued apologizing for Loreen. "After all, Ted, anyone can make a mistake—under stress."

"Yeah," Ted said. "So what did you two cool minds decide about Steve? That's all I'm interested in."

"Steve is all right," Bennett assured him. "I'm looking out for him."

"Thanks," snapped Ted. "But Steve's my responsibility."

"Look," Bennett argued quietly. "Be reasonable, Ted. You're in a spot. The police are watching every move you make. I saw a couple of the boys at the plant this morning. They weren't there to check out trucks. You're not in a position to do anything for Steve. I am. Can we leave it there?"

"No," answered Steve, moving his head emphatically. "We can't. There's been a slight change in the plot. Steve is no longer the hottest suspect the police have for Betty's death. I am. If anything should happen to Steve now, I'd be more than a suspect. I'd be a lead-pipe cinch. I want to make sure nothing happens to him, take him with me when I turn myself in at the Hall of Justice."

Loreen choked and put her hand to her throat. "How can they think you—?"

"Elizabeth was planning a divorce," Ted interrupted her. "She'd hired a detective, who came over to see me this morning, wanted to sell the report he'd prepared for her to use in court."

"Did you buy it?" Bennett asked, tense.

Ted wagged his head. "No."

"You poor damn fool!" pronounced Bennett solemnly. "Are you eager to take this rap for Steve?"

"No," stated Ted. "And I don't mean to be in anyone's book as a sucker who'd



TRIBUTE

by SAM L. MANN

*Here's to our friend, the traffic cop,
He knows when to "Go" and when
to "Stop"—*

*How happy all our lives would be
If we were only smart as he!*

did you do with Steve last night? He isn't at the cabin. I just came back from there."

"Do you mind if I answer that question for Loreen?" asked Bennett.

"I'm not particular."

"Loreen drove Steve by my place last night, late. I'd just come in from the meeting at the Palace Hotel. She said you'd ask her to pick Steve up and drive him to Boulder Creek, and when she did—pick him up—he told her about Betty being killed. She didn't know whether she was doing the right thing. It sounded to her as though you might have made a snap decision which might get us into trouble."

Ted studied Loreen while Bennett

try to buy evidence which might be used against him."

"Was—was—Did I figure in the report, Ted?" stammered Loreen.

"Naturally," he replied. "You were right there in a starring part, honey. You were The Other Woman. Slinky, blonde, and dangerous—a threat to the American home and hearth."

"It seems to me, Ted, you're taking a very cavalier attitude," growled Bennett.

"Pardon me." Ted bowed his head. "I suppose, when you're accused of murder, attitude is very important. Personally, it doesn't matter a hell of a lot what people think of me—as long as they don't think I killed Elizabeth."

"Hold on a second." Bennett frowned. "You couldn't have killed Elizabeth. You've got the soundest alibi in the world, Ted, so get that out of your head, that 'what-people-think' idea. You were at the hotel with me and the Chicago crowd all evening. We'd all testify for you if it came to that."

"The police can say I paid somebody to do it for me," Ted told him. "The same thing. The same murder. They'll drop the same kind of goofballs in the little pan of water over in the Quentin gas chamber. I'd appreciate it if you'd take me to Steve."

"If you say so, Ted," sighed Bennett. He snatched all three luncheon checks, took them to the cash register to settle with Tony. Ted helped Loreen out of the booth.

"Do you think," she asked him in a whisper, "Betty knew about the money?"

He nodded solemnly.

IT WAS decided that Bennett would drive Loreen back to the plant and be back to pick Ted up at Tony's in ten minutes.

"Give a quick beep with your horn, and I'll be right out," Owen said. "It'll give me time to finish my sandwich."

As soon as they were through the swinging doors, Ted went to the phone booth, dialed the Crest Meat Company. When Hazel, the switchboard girl, came on this time, he identified himself.

"This is Ted Owen, honey. Do me a favor. Don't faint or yell for a cop.

I just want information."

She sounded guarded, as though one of Malotte's men were standing over her, listening. "Yes, sir. Of course."

The "sir" was the tip-off. Hazel never stirred the help.

Ted said, "I wonder if you'd have a record of whether or not my wife called me yesterday afternoon while I was out?"

"Yes, sir, she did," replied Hazel readily. "She called twice."

"Did she talk to anyone else?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, she did. The second time she phoned, she asked to speak to Miss Tobey."

"You wouldn't have listened in, Hazel?"

"Oh, my, no, sir!" she gasped.

Hazel was a little fast on the draw with that gasp, Ted thought. She probably wasn't telling the truth, but there was nothing he could do about it. He said, "Thanks a lot, honey. You're a big help."

He returned to the table and finished the sandwich. He was honestly hungry and, for the first time in the last eighteen hours, wasn't too numb to know it.

Just as he was swallowing the last of his coffee, he heard the bleat of Bennett's horn and ran out, nodding good-by to Tony Pinta, who was lumped behind his big, chrome cash register with an Italiano cigar in his teeth.

Ted crawled into the car beside Bennett, and the big Cadillac droned south along Bay Shore Highway, past the San Francisco airport—six lanes of sudden death.

Bennett stayed in the outside lane, driving a conservative forty miles an hour. He didn't seem in any mad rush to get where he was going.

He said, "You know, kid, I hope you realize what you're doing. Murder is a hell of a serious matter to gamble with. You can only be wrong once."

"I'm not too worried," Ted replied. "All the time, this makes more sense to me. I don't know how they fit together, but I get flashes which seem to connect. When I first saw Betty up there in her room, dead, I couldn't think. All I knew for certain was that I had to keep Steve from being pushed around by a bunch

of heavy-handed cops."

"Incidentally," Bennett said, nodding, "it's a damn shame we didn't think of this last night, but we could have said Steve had been at my place, doing some work around the grounds. I'd have backed you up."

"Thanks." Ted smiled. "I wish we had thought of that—in time."

Bennett left the Bay Shore at Redwood City and drove toward the hills through Woodside. His place was over the Palo Alto line. They were out of the residential area. On either side of the road were orchards, big estates with swimming pools, acres of beautifully barbered lawn, shrubbery, and shade trees dripping over the roadway. Bennett punched a button on the dashboard, and the radio boomed at them, urging mothers to feed their kids some horrible pap which was supposed to build healthy little bones.

Next came a big-name newscaster. In tones of doom, he said, "Bulletin, Santa Cruz, California. A new and sensational development in the Elizabeth Owen murder case has just been announced by the police. A Chrysler automobile registered to Ted Owen, husband of the murdered woman, has been found abandoned in this beach resort city.

A body identified as that of Steve Milner, sought by the police for questioning in connection with Elizabeth Owen's murder, had been jammed into the luggage compartment. Police state that death was caused by garroting. A state-wide manhunt for Ted Owen is now under way. The San Francisco police have issued the following description . . ."

Ted snapped off the radio switch.

"What's the matter?" leered Bennett. "Don't you want to hear the rest of it?"

HE COULD afford to leer. He had pulled to the side of the road and stopped and was covering Ted with a gun. It was a deadly, neat-looking little gun. Probably made the same kind of a hole. Ted felt as though he were trying to back out of the car without opening the door. He was pressed against it, hard. His lips were dry, stiff.

"You killed Steve! You didn't even wait to see what would happen!"

"I told you I thought it was dangerous to gamble with murder," said Bennett through his teeth.

A powder-blue Olds coupé pulled in front of them and stopped. Ted didn't have a chance to be optimistic—he recognized the car before Loreen was out of it.

She trotted back to Bennett's gaudy heap, her purse swinging heavily from her wrist. There was a reason why it was heavy. She was packing a gun, too, had it out, when she opened the door on Ted's side.

She said, "Slide over, darling." There was no love in the endearment, no feeling. Ted did as he was told.

When Loreen was in, Bennett put his gun away and started the car again. They rode a short distance in silence, then Ted chuckled grimly.

"Here we are together," he said. "Three miserable people—and I use the word *people* loosely. We engage in a cozy little racket, double-cross the company for a lot of loot. There's nothing to it. I sell meat to my regular dealers; Loreen looks out for the receipt tags coming into the office from the delivery trucks and keeps them off the company's books; Bennett takes his cut because this whole thing is his baby and he can handle the boys from the home office if they get suspicious. No one is hurt particularly, except the stockholders. Yet, I'm wanted for murder and both of you should be. What a stinking world!"

"Anyway, dear," said Loreen brightly, "you aren't long for it."

Bennett was driving south again. Peach orchards along the roadside, empty peach orchards. There was very little traffic to occupy Bennett, or to give Ted even a pale chance to go for Loreen's gun.

Ted grinned crookedly at her. "I'm the lucky one. I know where I sit, what I can see from here. You two jokers can look forward to snarling at each other for a few weeks, or months—maybe even a year—each of you waiting for the other one to make a move and hoping you can beat them to the draw. I wouldn't trade places with anybody here."

"Good," Bennett approved with a nod, "because you aren't going to."

Ted looked at the gun in Loreen's hand and grinned. "I didn't think I was." He raised his eyes to her face, wondered what he'd ever seen there, what he'd ever thought was soft and kind and exciting.

He said, "If we have time for you to tell me, Loreen, I'd like to know what set this off. I know Betty called you yesterday at the office. What did she say?"

"She told me she was going to get a divorce," Loreen answered, her eyes level, cold. "She'd had a detective follow us, knew everything."

Ted laughed and commented acidly, "Now don't tell me, Loreen, that all this homicide is to protect your reputation as a good girl!"

"No, Ted," Loreen wagged her head. "Betty had something else to say. She told me she knew you were involved in some racket—had been stealing from the company right along—and she could prove it. She was going to see that if I got you, I'd have to wait for you to be released from jail."

VI

BENNETT said, "What did you do, Owen, tell your wife what a big shot you were?"

Ted shrugged. "Elizabeth wasn't a total idiot. Last night, after the police left the house, I discovered she'd appropriated all my canceled checks for the last five years, had them locked in a cabinet in her room. She'd added them up, to support her claim for a fat settlement when she sued for divorce. It took no great mathematical talent to figure that if I was earning five or six thousand dollars a year selling meat for the Crest Company and was spending fifteen, something was more than slightly wrong. She knows I don't play the races or the stock market. If I made it at all, I had to make it out of meat. And, in my bracket, you don't knock down that kind of money legitimately."

"Too bad you left your canceled checks where she could find them, honey," Loreen declared. "It made her a lot of trouble."

"Yeah," agreed Ted, "I see it did. I suppose, after you hung up on Betty,

you went to Bennett's office. The two of you put your busy little heads together, figured she'd have to be stopped, because if she had evidence that'd send me to jail, it would also involve both of you. I know Bennett was at the meeting last night, so I guess that leaves you, dear," he added. "You got into the house and garroted Betty."

"How clever can you be!" Loreen taunted. "I called Betty, told her I wanted to talk to her—about us. She let me in, and then I persuaded her to take me upstairs to her room." Loreen wagged the gun meaningfully.

"It was so easy it was frightening. I told her to get in bed, sit there. I was behind her. I believe she thought I meant to shoot her. She never looked back at me. I think she had her eyes shut."

Ted shuddered. "You're a sweet kid!"

"We tried to keep you clean," Bennett declared, "to make sure you had a perfect alibi. If you had let Milner take the rap for you, nobody would have been hurt."

"No one, except Betty," corrected Ted. "And Steve."

"No jury would ever have sent Steve to the chair," Bennett stated. "He was a psycho. A few years in a mental hospital, and he'd have been out, as good as ever."

Ted felt sick. There was a hard, urgent knot below his diaphragm. He had trouble breathing.

He could still hear Bennett. "Loreen was trying to do what was best," Bennett was saying. "It took guts. But she went through with it because she loved you."

Ted got a grip on his nausea, snorted. "It's too bad we can't live happily ever after, looting the company and squashing anybody who got in our way. A real happy couple!"

They had run out of the flat orchard country, were climbing into the hills back of Los Gatos. They passed a few vineyards, the grapevines cut back, the gnarled stumps marching across the side of the brown hill. Then the big trees closed in. The road petered out to a narrow, gravelled lane pitted with chuck-holes. Bennett's Cadillac took it all in good grace. He didn't slow down per-

ceptibly, and the gravel pinged against the fenders as the car wound farther into the hills.

Ted remarked, "And so, last night, when I called you and said I wanted you to drive Steve to Boulder Creek, you knew your big inspiration for our happy home life was kaput. I can see you weren't being gored by any dilemma. If I wouldn't let Steve be sent away to a mental hospital as a dangerous psycho to spend the rest of his life in a padded cell, you'd make sure I received for Betty's death."

"I suppose you and Bennett had very little trouble with Steve. After you killed him, you brought him to my place. The car was parked out in front. You forced the trunk and put him in there. Sooner or later, somebody would discover him—and then, I was had. There's only one thing I don't understand."

"What's that?" asked Bennett, keeping one eye on the road which followed the irregular, jutting contour of the hill.

"As long as you had me framed so beautifully," Ted replied, "is this trip necessary? Why not let the State of California tidy up the mess for you with a quick trial and execution? Or have you two decided you like homicide better than canasta?"

LOREEN said, "This is insurance, darling. When you're found here in the hills, obviously a suicide, there won't be any possibility of someone getting the mistaken idea that you're innocent."

"Thank you, Lucretia Borgia!" commented Ted bleakly. "Now, does anyone

mind if the condemned man enjoys a last cigarette?"

Loreen held her purse out to him. "There's a package in there."

Ted shook his head. "As long as it's going to be my last one," he said, "I'd just as soon it didn't taste of your perfume. There's a package in the pocket of my jacket."

She slipped her hand in his pocket, started to say, "I—"

Ted cut her off with his elbow, crashing it into her throat. His hand caught her gun wrist, held it away from him. At the same time, he was busy with Bennett, too. They were just rounding a wide curve. To the right, the ground fell away practically to the valley floor, with very little but scenery and fresh air between. Ted had got hold of the wheel and now put all his weight into swinging it out of Bennett's grasp. Tires slued and screamed, spraying gravel, and the Cadillac careened off the road. For a moment it was airborne, then it nosed down, struck and began to roll.

Ted never knew when it stopped. On the first handspring Bennett's car did down the shoulder of the road, he blacked out. There had been a rush of earth, and the windshield had cobwebbed before his eyes. That was all he remembered about their plunge down the hillside.

Ted Owen came to with a large awareness for every part of his body. He felt as though he'd spent a day in a rotary washing machine and had been spun dry afterward.

Painfully he raised his head. Saw

[Turn page]

AMAZING THING! By Cooper

SENSATIONAL NEW **TING**
CREAM FOR
FOOT ITCH
(ATHLETE'S FOOT)
- REGULAR USE HELPS
RELIEVE ITCHING - SOOTHES
BURNING BETWEEN CRACKED
PEELING TOES -
AIDS HEALING
AMAZINGLY!



FIRST
USED
IN HOSPITALS
NOW
RELEASED TO
DRUGGISTS
GUARANTEED

TING MUST
SATISFY YOU IN
A WEEK - OR
MONEY BACK!



EVEN IF OTHER PRODUCTS
HAVE FAILED TRY AMAZING
TING CREAM TODAY!
GREASELESS, STAINLESS
ALL DRUGGISTS ONLY 60¢ A TUBE

Ting
AMAZING
CREAM

he'd been thrown clear of the car—he and Loreen. She was not more than ten feet from him, and was lying very still. The car stood on its hood, its rear wheels pointed up the hill. It was burning brightly. Bennett was not visible.

Ted managed to whip enough fight into his sore body to pull himself away from the side of the hill. He stood up, swaying drunkenly.

Loreen's gun was shining in the late afternoon sunlight a couple of steps from where he stood. He stumbled over, picked it up, thrust it in his belt. Then he went looking for Bennett and found him mouse-trapped under the car. The

Ted helped raise her head, so she was able to see the burning car. "In there. He was dead by the time I came to."

She groaned a hollow, "Oh" and struggled to pull herself up.

Ted held her, said, "You'd better lie still. You have a broken leg. I don't think you'll be in any hurry to leave."

She fell back, breathing rapidly, shallowly. Her teeth showed between her thinly drawn lips. She said, "Why—why don't you go for help?"

Ted shrugged. "No reason to knock myself out, baby." He pointed to a ranger station on a hilltop across the valley. "By now, he's spotted our smoke.

Next Issue:

MAN SINISTER

by TALMAGE POWELL

Plus four other novels of violence and mystery

fire had already passed over him. It must have been a sheet of flame when the gasoline tank ruptured.

Ted turned around. Loreen was moving, one arm fluttering helplessly. He struggled up the loose gravel, knelt beside her. From the way one leg was bent, there was no question about its being broken. He could see the bulge of her thigh-bone pressing almost through the flesh.

He moved it to take the pressure off the muscle. She groaned and ground her teeth, drooling like a hungry animal. She stared at him, terrified.

Ted shook his head. "Take it easy, honey," he said. "I know I'm no eye tonic, but you're not so beautiful, yourself."

Her lips trembled. She shut her eyes, opened them again nervously, searching his face. "What happened, Ted?"

He grinned. "I ran us off the road. I thought maybe, if all three of us were gone, the world might be a happier place. There was a slight miscalculation; two of us are left."

She asked, through clenched teeth, "Bennett? Where's he?"

There'll be a fire party up here before I could scramble to the road."

He sat down in the gravel beside her, pulled a crumpled cigarette out of the pocket of his jacket, lit it and took a deep drag.

Loreen said, "I'd—I'd like a cigarette, too."

He looked down at her. She was trying to make with a big, brave, wet-eyed smile, which didn't come off. It didn't go over worth a damn with Ted. He saw her slipping behind Betty, the stocking in her hand, ready to choke out a life. He saw her setting Steve up for Bennett.

He took another drag on his cigarette, then stuck it in her lips. "You know, Loreen," he said, "I think you're lucky to have a broken leg. I never heard of anybody being wheeled into the gas chamber."

She gagged on a lungful of smoke.

Ted Owen grinned bleakly. "Don't take it so big, honey," he said. "You'll have a friend in Quentin when they bring you over for the ceremony. I'll be paying off, too, for what we stole from the company."





the CRYPTOGRAM CORNER

by Simon Cipher

THE use of codes and secret writings, from time immemorial, has been invaluable in war-time. "Secret languages" are sometimes used too. There is, for example, one language spoken in the United States that is almost absolutely "secret" though it has been disguised in no way.

The Comanche Indians of Oklahoma have no written language. It is estimated that only about thirty white men in the entire world understand their strange tongue. For this reason, a handful of these red men proved extremely valuable to the army in World War I by relaying secret messages over phone lines which might have been tapped by spies.

So successful was the stunt, that even before the outbreak of World War II, the Signal Corps already had many Comanche braves undergoing special training, ready to step in for similar duty.

There are, it seems, a few brilliant cryptographers who can glance at a crypt, breathe a mysterious incantation and, within three sec-

onds, start writing the answer. But most of us must work by plain sweat.

Codes are solved in much the same manner as a murder mystery—by tracking down clues, playing hunches, and using ordinary common sense.

Codes or cryptograms can be solved by simple trial and error substitution. More scientifically, they are solved by observing the frequency with which each code letter occurs.

The letter E is by far the most frequently occurring letter in the alphabet. So, for example, if the letter X has been substituted for E in the code, you'll probably find it occurring more than any other letter. Also frequent are the letters T, A, O, N, I, S, H, R, in that order.

Count the number of times each code letter occurs. The most frequent letter will probably be E, the next T, etc. Watch for words that might be THE, or IN, AT, ON, OF. Play your hunches and use your ingenuity.

A Limerick for Beginners

ABC DCECDCFG BCFDH IJDG KCCLBCD
LJMMCG J BCF J NPOA CMCQJFA LDCJARD
ABC BCF SMCJOCG ITAB ABJA
MTJG JF CQQ TF BTO BJA
JFG ABRO GTG ABC BCF DCIJDG KCCLBCD!

Clues:

1. Start with the one-letter word.
2. Find the letter "E" through frequency. This will tip off the first word.
3. The familiar, everyday four-letter word ABJA should now be apparent.
4. You should now be able to work out the three-letter word CQQ. Note the low frequency "Q."

A Motto for 1952

AJP DX FRC FDHC VJZ KTT NJY HCA FJ ZKTTG FJ FRC
XBSSJZF JV FRCDZ SKZFG

On page 129 you will find the answers and an explanation of how they were derived.

DANCE, pretty maiden

A Novel by JOHN H. KNOX

I

THE woman in the black shawl shed no tears; her dark Indian face was set in a dull fixity of suffering as she said, "My Liria, she's a good girl. Every week she breeng the groceries. She don't hurt nobody. I don't know why somebody done this to her. Who done this to my Liria?"

"We don't know, *Mamacita*," the big detective with the hard-bitten face said around his mashed cigar. "You ain't helped much, not knowing anything about her friends, as you say."

He kept his face turned. To her

mother, Liria Baeza had been a success. As a barefooted *muchacha* she had danced on the clay banks of a Monteverde canal, had danced her way from *pulqueria* to tourist trap, and finally had attained the alien splendor of this three-room apartment on the American side of the river. One did not question such magic too closely. One admired silk dresses, sheer hose, and shiny green plush furniture and was quietly grateful for big brown sacks of groceries. One was not too curious—until something like this happened.



*Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast, excite lustful
passions—and spell trouble for foolish, shapely native girls!*

There was a shot and a shrill
cry, as Kern lurched forward



Detective Inspector Joe Ollin was glad she hadn't seen the same room in the gloom of 5 A.M. The girl had been lying on the floor in a fantastic, embroidered mantle and a mitre of green plumes, with a gash across her throat that had caused a young police officer to be sick, but which, Ollin thought wryly, would probably have looked familiar enough to an Aztec priest of about the year 1519 or earlier.

He said, "We know about this guy that paid the rent. You don't seem to know much about him. But we'll get him."

They even had a picture of him—in the 1941 Yearbook of Frontera College, where he had been a student-assistant in history. Hilary Kern, a big blond youth with a square jaw and intense, humorless eyes. The class poet had written: H is for Hilary; in history he's fine. But in loftier subjects he chooses to pine."

One wondered about that.

"You go on home now," Ollin said. "If you think of anything else we ought to know, you call the police over there, and they'll get in touch with us. *Adios.*"

After watching her shuffle down the carpeted hall toward the stairs, he shoved back a news cameraman with a brusque "Get out" and slammed the door. He stood a moment, frowning at a fingerprint man and a police photographer, who were working with methodical unconcern. Then he stepped to the front window and stared out.

Morning sunlight beat down upon the thinning fringes of the city where the small four-apartment building stood, with vacant lots to either side and a seedy little market center on the corner. Through cottonwoods across the street he glimpsed the green belt of cattails which marked the course of the Rio Grande, and beyond that the drab hills and mud buildings of Monteverde, Mexico.

The old woman, he noticed, was moving in that direction. As she reached a crossing, a long ancient roadster, painted a pale yellow and fitted with every conceivable gadget, drew up abreast of her. Its banked horns sounded three gentle notes, and the driver leaned out, smiling. His face was dark and young,

and he wore a bright blue suit which shone almost lilac in the sunlight. His thick black hair came down, like a low-pulled skullcap, almost to his eyebrows. He swung the door open and the old woman, after some obvious hesitancy, got in and was whisked away.

OLLIN noticed the car's Mexican license, jotted it down in his notebook. Then he walked to a cabinet phonograph, which stood with lid up near the hall door, and studied the record on its turntable.

The record did not have a printed seal; it was in fact, a mere circle of blank paper in which had been written in ink:

The Ochpaniztli Chant—with drums,
conches, flutes.
Probably performed at the Festival of
Xipe.

Obviously it was a private recording. Ollin tested the needle with his thumb, set the disc spinning, dropped the needle.

Weird, low music pulsed out into the room. Played on muted drums and sobbing wind instruments, it stole into the air like a heady, unpleasant vapor, thickening until it was stifling. When shrill flutes began gabbling, they seemed to give out an almost idiot grief that sent a revulsion shivering through Ollin's nerves.

The fingerprint man laid his brush down and looked up.

"Hey, for cripes sake, shut that off, will you?"

Ollin eyed him thoughtfully. "Why? Ever hear it before?"

"No, and I don't want to hear it again. It creeps."

The photographer was frowning, too, watching the sound box from which a chanting had begun to well and surge. Ollin saw the man's face tighten, almost with anger, as the music began to change, the grief fading and giving way to a new element of wildness that was like the panting of an animal, a thirsty animal, that suddenly had begun to call, call, call. . . .

The photographer walked to the phonograph and, without a word to Ollin, lifted the sound arm and shut the

machine off. He stood a moment, staring at the lettering on the disc. He looked at Ollin.

"You feel it?"

"What?"

"I don't know. But a little more of that, and I'd be ready to wreck the joint. Whoever made that tune up was full of hashish. If you want to play it again, wait until I'm gone."

Ollin said, "It's the heat, Charlie. We need rain." He ran a finger under his collar, took out his notebook, and jotted down the writing on the disc's center. He glanced at his summary of the information already obtained:

Occupants of apt. across from girl's absent on trip. In apt. on left downstairs, weird music heard playing around midnight. Don't know when it stopped. Baeza girl often danced to such music.

In apt. below victim's, Harriet Potson, spinster, says music woke her at 12:15—came to abrupt stop a few minutes later. Music described as "a lot of crazy crazy wailing which ended with a cry like 'whoopee,' or 'yipee.' Then silence. Heard no one leave. At 4:30, milkman saw blood running from under door, called police.

None of these witnesses knew victim well. Man answering Kern's description seen there frequently. Other visitors occasionally—no descriptions. Information about Kern obtained from non-resident landlord. Kern not at the apt. where he lives. Place being watched.

After the last entry, Ollin wrote: No known relatives of Kern. Check his acquaintances at Frontera College.

He closed the notebook, went out and down the hall to the pay telephone booth. He called headquarters.

"Any report on Kern yet? . . . No? Well, tell Harris to stand by. Keep after Kern. He may have crossed the river, but he carried no visa or passport—at least, none issued here—and can't get far. Contact all customs and immigration men who may have seen him cross in early hours. Put a team working the bars in Monteverde." On an impulse he added, "Look for out-of-the-way places where stews weep in their morning tequila and they play

woogie native music. . . . Yeah, I'm going out to Frontera College now."

THE MAN they were looking for sat on an iron bench in the little plaza across from the old bullet-pocked cathedral in Monteverde and fed sparrows with crumbs from a penny bun. Around him old men gossiped; burdened women coming from the *mercado* paused to rest; children played; bootblacks scampered and solicited; a rheumy-eyed drunk sagged in unabashed repose.

The man was not listening to any music, except the junglelike hum from the crowded streets. He kept his feet tucked back under the bench because he had no shoes, and the grass made them less conspicuous. The man was preparing to think about something, but he was not ready for it to begin just yet.

An hour ago, he had awakened from a deep, but not quite dreamless sleep, to find himself on a cot in a plaster-walled room, his clothing soggy and mud stained, his hat and shoes gone. At the time, nothing had interested him, except getting hold of the bottle which some instinct told him was under the cot. Having got it and gone through the punishing ritual of forcing the first drink down, he had found the second one comparatively easy. A third one had enabled him to get up, dust the worst of the dried mud from his clothes, and discover, to his surprise, that his wallet, with a considerable sum of money in it, had not been touched.

Cheered by this, he had dared to cast a mental glance at the previous night. Things were fairly clear until about ten o'clock. After that they began to get hazy. Then came a complete blank.

The man shifted on the bench and began to re-orient himself. The drinks, plus the bun he had forced himself to eat, gave him stamina to face the outstanding fact which was that, after two years of sobriety, he had fallen off the wagon with a crash. But since he could not recall just what he had done, he decided to face immediate needs. Some shoes, some clean clothes, a cool place, preferably dim, a cool drink, preferably tall, and he would face the music.

Oh, there was bound to be music to face. There always was. If it happened

to be a little more serious this time than smashing a plate glass window, say, well, he was better prepared to survive it. In the old days, poverty had haunted his hangovers. Now he had money, and not just what was in his pocket, either.

Hilary Kern got up, moved to the other side of the bench and began to look furtively over the bar fronts across the square. Just then a voice from a graveled drive beyond a hedge of shrubbery reached his ears. "You don't think he'd be hanging around a public place like this, do you?" the voice asked gruffly in good American.

"Quién sabe?" a Latin voice replied. "He has already done a rather strange thing, isn't it so?"

Cop voices, Hilary Kern thought. *Some poor devil's in trouble, and they're hunting him.* A twinge of pity touched him as he moved on toward the doorway of the tavern he had selected.

It was just what he wanted—cool semi-dark, scented with kegwood and alcohol, a table in shadow, a waiter with the incurious face of a Mayan mask. Kern ordered tequila, then called a newsboy, bought a paper which he folded and shoved into his pocket without even a glance at the headlines, and said he wished to buy a pair of *huaraches*.

That was easily arranged. With leather under his feet again, he felt like a different man and began to face his problem more cheerfully. Why not just call up Professor Siddington and ask him to find out if anybody had preferred any charges for damage, or assault and battery, or whatnot. Good old C.P.! He would do it and square the beef—if any—to.

But he hated to pain and disappoint his mentor, Prof. C. P. Siddington, worse even than to further disillusion Edna Ferry, especially since Edna had quit him anyhow because of Liria. "Well, why not call up Liria herself?" he muttered.

At the sound of that name, a pang of confused fear stabbed him. Why, of course, there had been some racket with Liria; otherwise, calling her would have been his first thought. Undeniably something unpleasant lay in that direction. Too, if he called her now, she

might arouse the whole apartment, shrieking abuse at him over the telephone. Yet he wanted badly to see her, talk to her.

SUDDENLY a picture of the wrinkled old woman, her mother, flashed through his mind, the memory of a single visit he had made with Liria to the Baeza farm, the picture of a patio shaded by ragged palms where he had sat and drunk home-made wine and watched the blue canal water flow between the green of vegetable fields.

The memory charmed him. He would find a delicatessen, load a basket with goodies, including Italian wine, go there, and get the old lady to call Liria. In that pastoral environment, they would thresh out their quarrel and reach a reconciliation.

He took a deep breath, ordered another drink, began to feel almost happy. After all, one little slip-up wasn't such a tragedy. He had money now and solid accomplishment behind him—accomplishment in a unique and original field—the collecting and recreating of the lost music and ritual of a vanished culture. Rare treasures he had winnowed from the dust of forgotten ages, the secret pulse-beat of a lost race, its music, its spiritual blood. Soon he would get the rarest treasure of all, the reproduction of a real sacrificial chant, preserved intact by a remote tribe of hill Indians whom his agent, I. Tezcat, had discovered—

Abruptly Kern shot upright, trembling. He had already got that treasure. The authentic *Ochpaniztli Chant* had come by air express from Mexico City yesterday, insured for a thousand dollars, which was considerably less than it had cost him!

Yes, now he recalled the mood of happy triumph which had tempted him to take "just one drink" to celebrate with Liria. Together they had begun to work out a dance routine to fit the music. That had been later, after dark, after they had laughed and drunk. She had put the costume on, and—

And what? The rest was hidden by a coiling fog. Kern slumped back into his chair. As he did so his hand brushed against something heavy in the pocket

of his still soggy coat. He thrust a hand in, and his fingers closed on an object that was hard, cold, sharp.

Without looking, he knew that it was a curious knife with a handle of bone-hard sapote wood, carved like a serpent's head and with a leaf-shaped blade of black glass-sharp obsidian in its jaws. It was an aztec sacrificial knife from his collection. But how did it happen to be in his pocket?

"You seek, fallow?" It was the voice



"Son, I find I can give you a bigger allowance than usual this week."

of the wooden-faced waiter, who apparently was not so unobservant after all. "You want crème de menthe? May-be settle stomach?"

Kern nodded, only vaguely aware of the other's words. Now he was going to have to face something and he knew it. Dodging, evading, running away, would not erase the shadow that lay across last night. He'd have to find out, and the sooner the better.

II

PROF. C. P. SIDDINGTON of the history department of Frontera College, was a wiry man with a thin face and frosty eyes. Confronting Inspector Ol-

lin across the big desk in his book-lined study, he spoke like a man who is in mortal pain but is determined not to show it.

"We've been expecting you, of course." He paused to glance at the slender, brown-haired girl who sat rigid at a small typewriter desk, her pretty face, with its wide-spaced eyes and somewhat prim lips, as stiff as a death mask. "We—Miss Ferry and I—are about as near a family as Hilary Kern has. I've known him since he was a freshman here, and Edna, well, she and Hil were once quite close, so—"

Ollin saw color flame along the girl's cheekbones and subside, but she kept her lips tight. Siddington went on, "So I'm glad you came to us. No matter how bad things may look, we still have faith in Hil, and I hope you'll withhold your own judgement until you know more about him."

Ollin said bluntly, "I'll try. But he was keeping this girl up; he was there last night. She's murdered, and he's skipped—"

Siddington nodded. "So to all appearances, he killed her. But Kern is a man whose conduct often belies appearances, a bit of a genius, perhaps, but a good part screwball, too. You may have noticed that his own apartment is as plain as a scholar-monk's. Nothing of the playboy there. The fact is, that to begin with, his relations with that girl, Liria, were not what one would suppose at all."

Edna Ferry turned and faced him then. "You needn't try to spare my feelings by pretending she wasn't—"

"I'm not," Siddington said quickly. "I am saying that to begin with, Liria Baeza was only a part of his research project. A full-blooded Indian, with the making of a magnificent dancer, she was to be merely the interpreter of the ancient music he collected. What their relations became later, after you allowed your jealousy to drive Hil away, I'm not prepared to say, and I doubt if it's pertinent to the problem."

"It usually is," Ollin said grimly. "Go on about his work."

"First," Siddington said, leaning back and folding his hands, "you must picture Hil Kern as I first knew him—a

gangling freshman, awkward, confused, ambitious, but unable to find a groove into which he would fit. With no musical talent at all, he first wanted to be a composer; with no acting ability, he next tried dramatics. Finally, when he was in a mood of discouragement, I persuaded him to interest himself in history, particularly the history of ancient Mexico. He did, but unfortunately he had meanwhile learned to drink. And since he seems to be one of these people who have no tolerance for alcohol whatever, he almost had an early crack-up."

"And would have, if you hadn't saved him," Edna Ferry put in unexpectedly.

"Well," Siddington said, "at any rate I steadied him a bit, kept him in the groove until the war came along."

"He was with the marines, wasn't he?" Ollin asked.

"Yes, until they shipped him back with battle fatigue. He was in various hospitals and when he got out, he started drinking again."

"And again you pulled him out of it," the girl said almost resentfully.

"Say rather," Siddington modestly amended, "that a lucky break provided me with something to get him really interested in. Actually, I had lost touch with him, until he showed up here one day, as drunk as a lord and proclaiming that he was rich. It seems that the niggardly uncle who had reared him had finally died and left him a cool half million dollars, about the worst thing that could have happened to a boy already well down the road to dipsomania. I knew something would have to be done, or he'd be dead or in an asylum in a year."

"You talked him into sobering up?"

SIDDINGTON shook his head sadly. "I couldn't have. It was sheer luck. It just happened that about this time I got a letter from an eccentric fellow in Mexico City who calls himself I. Tezcat. He claimed to be a scholar of Indian blood who had made contact with some wild hill tribes who had preserved the old music of the Aztecs in secret rituals no white man was ever permitted to see or hear."

"It sounded fishy, of course, until I played a recording the man had sent

along. That set my hair afire. But the man wanted so much money—for expenses necessary to carry on his work—that I knew our little college could not afford to finance him. I played that recording for Kern—after I had got him temporarily sobered up—and it did what no amount of sermonizing could do. It gave him a purpose he has followed steadfastly ever since."

"I assume," said Ollin, "that the big safe there at his apartment holds more of these recordings?"

"Thousands of dollars worth of them," Siddington said. "This fellow Tezcat charges fabulous prices. But Hil didn't care. His ultimate plan was to subsidize a sort of ballet troupe here at the school which would present the ancient ceremonies and dances just as they were enacted centuries ago. Money was no object with him because he not only had an objective but a theory to prove as well."

"A theory?"

Siddington frowned as he rolled a big fountain pen along the edge of his desk. "About the music—and its effect—" He looked up. "Anyhow, this work was his salvation."

"Not quite!" Edna Ferry snapped and looked quickly away.

"Oh," Siddington said, "there was Liria, of course. But if you hadn't been so jealous, my dear, you might never have driven Hil to her. Anyhow, the recordings kept coming from Mexico City, and things seemed to be going along fine, until—"

"Until last night?"

Siddington nodded miserably. He got up and walked to the window and stared out across the sunlit campus. His hands, folded behind his back, worked nervously. "Something cracked," he muttered through his teeth. "For some reason, Hil took a drink, and then—" He turned, dramatically spreading his hands.

"You have no idea what caused it?"

Siddington came back and sat down. "It certainly wasn't discouragement," he said. "Hil had just got what he considered the biggest prize of all, a recording of what purported to be the sacrificial chant used in the ancient Ochpaniztli festival."

"It was on the phonograph up there," Ollin said. "It seems it was being played just before the girl—died."

"Ah!" said Siddington. He looked a trifle paler. He tried to make his voice casual as he asked, "You played it? Er—how does it sound?"

Ollin laughed sourly. "Like hell, for my money."

Siddington looked down. "Well, it accompanied a rather horrible ceremony, of course—the sacrifice of Xipe, the Flayed."

"Shee-pay?" Ollin asked.

"Yes. It's spelled X-I-P-E but pronounced 'shee-pay.' In this god's worship the victim was decapitated, instead of having the heart torn out, as in most sacrifices. This girl, Liria, was—"

"Almost," Ollin said. He saw that Edna Ferry was biting her lip.

Siddington straightened, slammed a fist on the desk. "Well, we must face it! But I won't believe Hil did it. He probably simply got drunk and wandered off. Then some jealous suitor of the girl's came in and killed her."

"She had some other suitors?"

Siddington shrugged. "I don't know. But it's likely, with her type, isn't it?"

OLLIN thought of the sleek youth in the yellow car who had picked up the girl's mother that morning. "Still," he said, "since the manner of death seems to tie up somehow with that music, Kern seems the one most likely to know about that. By the way, what can you tell me about this man, I. Tezcat, who sold Kern the recordings?"

"Practically nothing," Siddington replied. "He contacted me first, as I said. but after Kern took the business over, I never heard from him again. He appears to have been very secretive anyhow. Claimed his identity had to be kept secret in order to maintain his contact with the Indians he got the music from. Kern just wrote to him at a post office box in Mexico City."

"You knew Kern received this new recording yesterday?"

"Oh, yes. He called me late yesterday afternoon, seemed quite jubilant. I suggested he play it over for Edna and me at once, but he said he wanted to play it over for Liria first. He promised to

call. Edna and I waited in my office until after eleven, but—" He glanced at the girl—"Hil never called. Finally we gave up waiting. I drove Edna to her boarding house and went home to bed myself."

Ollin said, "Well—" He rested his hands on the arms of his chair a moment, then rose. He watched the smoldering emotion in Edna Ferry's averted face. He asked Siddington, "Will you pronounce the name of that Aztec god again—X-I-P-E?"

"Shee-pay," Siddington said quickly. "The *x* has an *sh* sound in the Nahuatl languages. Is it of some importance?"

"Could be," Ollin said. "I just happened to think that a woman who heard that music playing last night says it stopped on a cry that sounded like 'whoopee,' or 'yipee.' So I wondered—"

"It was probably the god's name," Siddington said with a nod.

"Anyhow, I'll play it over and check," Ollin said. "It might help to establish the time of death. I'd like for both of you to come down to headquarters later and hear it, too."

Siddington nodded, but the girl looked away with such an expression of fear that Ollin said, "Bear up, Miss Ferry. You might be able to help Hilary Kern. I assume you want to?"

An almost fanatical light flashed briefly into the girl's brown eyes. "I guess I'd do anything for Hil," she said fiercely. Then she dropped her head on folded arms and began to sob; "Oh, that little she-devil was the ruin of him!"

Siddington hurried over to comfort her. Ollin stood a moment eyeing her with narrowed gaze. Then he went out quietly.

Back at headquarters, Ollin read reports. The license of the yellow car which had picked up Señora Baeza that morning had been traced by the Mexican authorities. It belonged to one Fausto Azul, twenty-five, sometime novice bull fighter, tourist guide, part-time musician. Questioned about him, the Señora Baeza had said that he was a childhood friend of Liria's, whom she had not seen in several years. They had met accidentally a few weeks ago. Since then he had seen Liria occasionally, she thought. She did not know Azul's address and

neither did the Monteverde police.

The fingerprint report from the dead girl's apartment showed her prints and Kern's all over the place. But curiously, the only prints found on the whiskey bottle and the two glasses were Kern's. The whiskey was being analyzed, but the report had not yet come in. Ollin ordered a search of Kern's apartment for any papers which might shed light on the mysterious correspondent in Mexico City, I. Tezcat. Then he set out for Monteverde. He was very curious about the bullfighter-musician, Fausto Azul. He thought the Señora Baeza might be persuaded to be a little more helpful.

III

HILARY KERN sat on the back seat of a cab, with a basket from the delicatessen beside him, and showed the driver where to swing off the Chihuahua City highway. In a region of small irrigated truck farms, the Baeza house, a sprawling, low-roofed building of whitewashed adobe, squatted among trees and flowers, with several acres of sun-blistered bean rows fanning out behind it.

When the cab stopped, Kern staggered out, paid the driver, hooked an arm through the handle of the basket, and reeled down a path flanked by flowering oleanders. Blinded by the sun, he collapsed against the screened front door and knocked noisily.

In the dim interior he saw plastered walls, a crucifix, a wreath of artificial flowers. Then slippers swished on a flagged floor, and a squat shape materialized from shadows.

"Hola, Mamacita," he greeted. Wincing a little at his own bad manners, he rattled on dizzily, "I pay you a little visit, bring you a little present. See?" He pushed the basket forward.

Something was wrong. The old woman had stopped a few feet from the door. Her mouth was open, her black eyes wide with some emotion which included disbelief.

"Don't you know me?" he gulped. "Liria's friend, Señor Kern. Once I was here, drinking the excellent red wine you have—"

Her face changed swiftly. For a

second the eyes had narrowed with sudden shrewdness; then the whole brown mask relaxed into its customary expression of dull good humor. "Sí, sí, Señor Kar-nay." Now she was smiling, opening the door, taking the basket. "You come in. You leetle beet *borracho*, I theenk? You want the rest a leetle, maybe?"

Relieved of the basket, Kern stepped in, made a move to slump into a chair, but a firm hand caught his arm. "No, no, better you lie down. Then I breeng you wine, beeg peetcher good red wine. Then you rest and maybe-so talk a leetle, no?"

He chuckled happily as she guided him along a dim passage and threw open the door of a small, cool, clean room with a bed. He flopped down on the covers, closed his eyes, and let the dark swirl pleasantly. He opened his eyes, and as if by magic she was back with a big earthenware pitcher and a tumbler.

"Now you dreenk; I come back."

The wine had a spicy bouquet, and as he poured a tumblerfull, he heard her fussing with the door and muttering, "Thees lock she no want to stay closed—" The door slammed; he did not hear the key which was turned on the outside.

The old woman stood a moment in thought, then shuffled down the passage to the kitchen where pepper and garlic hung from the rafters, and where, behind an oilcloth covered table, sat a dark young man in a sky-blue suit with a glass of wine in his hand. The unusually low forehead between his matted black hair and his thick eyebrows was creased in questioning furrows.

The old woman laid a finger to her lips. "Is Kar-nay. Is drunk. Is locked in. Now I go in field and call José."

"No, no," the youth said quickly, "do not trouble José. José is stricken. Let him work. It is better. I—" he tapped his chest—"will attend to Karn. Am I not like a brother to Liria? You will say nothing to anyone, not to the police, either, because they will only cause trouble. It is I who will—"

He broke off, staring at the door. The old woman had turned, too. The sound of an automobile motor out front had been followed by the crunch of feet on

the gravel path. A series of sharp knocks sounded on the door, and a crisp voice called, "Senora Baeza? It is Inspector Ollin from Frontera. May I trouble you for a few moments?"

The old woman looked at the youth. His eyes were intent; a finger lay across his lips. "Go. But do not say that either I, nor Kern, have been here. Leave Kern to me." He backed out the door and closed it as the old lady started toward the front of the house.

IN THE bedroom, Kern gulped his wine, leaned back on a gaudy satin cushion, and watched the ceiling revolve pleasantly like a blank grey disc on a phonograph's turntable. He heard the car stop outside, heard a mutter of voices from the front room, but was not greatly concerned. The wine had set up a pleasant glow in his veins. He recalled that his reception had been friendly. Soon he would ask the old woman to call Liria, and all the unpleasantness would be settled.

But just then, amidst the bumbling mutter from the front room, a single word detached itself. It was "Liria," uttered in a gruff, distinctly American voice.

Kern swung his legs off the bed and bent a weaving course toward the front window. Through its screen of vines he saw a car out front. It was a gray sedan and bore the letters: Frontera Police Department.

Kern blinked and stiffened. What did this mean? Had Liria got drunk, too, and got herself into some trouble?

He moved slowly back into the room, a sudden resolve stiffening the weak joints of his knees. If Liria was in some trouble, he was certainly going to stand by her. He only hoped to would be able to speak soberly to the officer. He started toward the door.

A sharp hiss that stung his nerves like a rattlesnake's buzzer, spun him around. At the back window, he saw a face, dark and young, with coarse black hair above a narrow forehead and bared teeth of unimaginable whiteness.

"Do not be a fool, Kern!" a cold whisper warned.

"Who are you?" Kern gasped.

"A friend. Better you keep your

voice down, and better you come out through this window—*pronto!*"

"Come out? What for?"

The brown face glared at him in disgust. "'You play crazy, *amigo*? You got newspaper there. Can't you not read?"

Kern had forgotten the folded newspaper he had thrust into his pocket without a glance. Now he snatched it out, stared. His eyes fastened on a headline near the bottom of the page.

RICH SCHOLAR SOUGHT IN DEATH OF GIRL

His vision swam; his flesh seemed to freeze. Girl? What girl? But something inside him whispered, "You know. It will come back to you when you get the nerve to face it!"

He found himself moving in what seemed a dream but was actually a series of quick reflexes that carried him to the window, and over the sill, and into a patio that was shielded by a wall from the front of the house. Then he was wordlessly following the dark youth who led the way across a litter of crusty palm fronds and into the shelter of a dry irrigation ditch.

They came to a water gate, crawled through it, and splashed along in a shallow stream until they reached a spot where dense salt cedars masked the canal bank. They climbed out, and there, in a grove of cottonwoods, was a long, rakish yellow car. Staggering with exhaustion, Kern lurched through the door that was opened for him and collapsed in the front seat. Almost at once, the youth was beside him, and the motor was roaring. A pleasant rush of wind hit Kern's face, and he saw the landscape speeding past.

"Hey, where are we going? Who are you, anyhow?"

The dark head turned; white teeth and black eyes flashed Kern a smile. "Fausto Azul, at your service, Señor. Joost call me Leetle Boy Blue. I take you to a safe place to hide. Then we do the talking. You want dreenk?"

The hand thrust toward Kern proffered a bottle. Tequila. Kern winced. But he took it. His heart was pounding now like a broken piston. He thumbed the cord out, tilted the bottle, and the

hot stuff hit his throat like an astrin-gent. He choked it down and slumped back, shuddering. Above the motor's roar, the youth was saying:

"You no worry. Leetle Boy Blue, he's your friend. You got lots money, yes? We going feex everytheeng."

Somewhat Kern did not find the words reassuring, but he was in no condition to quibble. The tequila was raging in his brain like a fire.

IV

SUNSET'S red haze stained the drab hills back of Monteverde like spilled blood. From a thin band of slate-blue clouds, which straddled the river, came occasional feverish winks of lightning. No breeze moved to break the deadlock of the heat.

From his office window, Inspector Ollin watched yellow lights splash on in the suffocating dusk and fought a smoldering irritation which had mounted during the last hot hours of the day.

Some progress had been made, he conceded, but at every turn a blind alley seemed to develop. The old Señora Baeza had been a disappointment. With surface good humor but inner Indian suspiciousness, she had evaded his questions. The efforts of the Mexican police to locate Fausto Azul had been equally fruitless.

Then there was the puzzle of the safe in Kern's apartment. It had been opened by a locksmith, but aside from a collection of artifacts and Aztec jewelry and various papers, including Kern's will, which left his estate to Frontera College with the provision that his work be carried on under Siddington's direction, there was nothing else. Plenty of empty space showed where the folk-music recordings might have been; but there were none there now.

Ollin had called Professor Siddington about that, but the latter had been unable to offer any help. He knew that Kern *had* bought the recordings. Why he should have removed them, was anybody's guess. As for their having been stolen, that seemed unlikely. The jewelry hadn't been touched; the recordings were scarcely a prize to tempt a thief.

A report from the chemical laboratory

was equally confusing. Traces of laudanum had been found in the whiskey from the bottle in Liria's apartment, and in the liquor in one of the glasses. Had Kern drugged the girl before killing her? Her prints were not on the glass. In fact, only Kern's prints had been found on the glasses and bottle. Had he taken the drug to steel his own nerves for murder? If so, why put it into the bottle instead of simply into the drink he was taking?

Ollin shook his head, jabbed a fresh cigar into his mouth, and snapped on the light. He went over to the borrowed phonograph in one corner of the room and stared again at the disc with the strange words on it. Again he thought of the look of fear on Edna Ferry's face when he had asked her to be present while the recording was being played. There was a disturbing impression of something frozen about that girl, anyhow. He had decided she was one of those quiet, slightly prim people who are the soul of gentleness until scorned, wounded, crossed.

A knock on the door brought Ollin around to face it.

"Come in," he called.

The door opened, and a uniformed policeman ushered in Prof. C. P. Siddington and Edna Ferry.

Siddington looked tired, haggard, gloomy. The girl was alive with fear. She sat down stiffly on the edge of the chair Ollin offered her and clasped her hands to keep them from shaking.

Ollin said, "Try to relax, Miss Ferry. I just want to play the recording over and see if either of you can identify a cry at the end, which a witness said sounded like whoopee, or yipee. Since you haven't heard this music—" he laid a little extra stress on that statement—"maybe it won't be as bad as you fear."

She nodded, made an effort to smile. Siddington said, "It's some of Hil's superstitious theories about that old music that have got her upset."

"Superstitious theories?" Ollin asked.

Well, rather fantastic, at any rate." Siddington laughed weakly. "Hil claimed to believe that this old music had a hypnotic, almost magical power. He thought it explained why the Aztecs,

a sober, law-abiding people as primitives go, had the bloodiest religion that ever existed anywhere."

"He thought their music explained that?"

"Their sacerdotal music," Siddington qualified. "As you know, the priests of many ancient cultures had secrets—powers, if you like—by which they controlled the masses. Hil believed that the Aztec hierarchy had created a music and ritual which were absolutely hypnotic in their power to arouse normal people to the frenzy needed for their participation in the bloody sacrifices."

"Do you believe that?" Ollin asked bluntly.

"Oh no, no," Siddington disclaimed, spreading his hands. "Still—"

HE LOOKED with a sort of frowning distrust at the phonograph. Ollin went over and set the turntable spinning and dropped the needle onto the record.

The drums pulsed out with a low aching beat. Ollin had told himself that the ugly effect of the music that morning had been partly due to the associations with the murder room. Now he was not so sure. A weird tightness seemed to gather under his diaphragm as the drums goaded at his heart. Then, when the flutes broke through and the human chanting began to echo their blood call, it was like a dry, hot wind that seared across the senses until they screamed for relief.

How much was real, how much the product of his imagination? Ollin could not answer. He turned abruptly.

Siddington sat pale, but determinedly deadpan. The girl, on the other hand, was going to pieces quite openly. Her lips were parted, her terrified eyes glued to the machine. As the sobbing blood chant mounted to a crescendo, she raised a hand and clutched at her throat. Then, in a rattle of drums like hailstones, the music swept to its end. The girl's eyes flew to Ollin's face.

She gasped, "But there wasn't any cry!"

Ollin cut the machine off, went and stood by her chair.

"No, there wasn't any cry—on the record," he said. "But there was a cry,

the cry of a woman about to be murdered. And I believe *you* heard it to the accompaniment of this same music. That's why you've been afraid to hear it again."

Siddington came to his feet. "Hold on! You can't badger her. You've got no right to ask her to say anything which—"

"Which might incriminate her?" Ollin snapped. "All right." He laid a hand on the girl's shoulder. "You want to talk or not?"

"You'd better have a lawyer," Siddington urged.

The girl's head dropped onto her folded arms. "No, no, I want to talk," she sobbed. "I've held it in as long as I can. I hated her and I'm glad she's dead and I—"

"Edna!" Siddington snapped. "Watch your tongue, girl."

"Why should I?" The tear-wet face came up defiantly. "I'm guilty of her death. When you took me home last night, you commented on how upset I was. Well, you don't know half of it. I went to my room and pretended to go to bed, but instead I crawled out a window, walked to a cab stand, and was driven to that girl's place—"

"Miss Ferry," Ollin interrupted, "if you want a lawyer—"

"No, no, leave me alone. I want to tell it. You see, I had reached a breaking point. I had suspected all along that little hussy was just playing Hil for his money. Now I was sure of it. When he failed to call as he had promised, I just couldn't stand it any longer. I decided to go to that place and face them both."

She paused for breath, trembling determined to finish. "When I got there," she went on, "I just couldn't go in. The idea of causing a sordid scene was just too much."

"One moment," Ollin said. "Did you see Kern there with the girl?"

Edna Ferry hesitated. "Well— Yes. Now that I'm telling it, I'll tell it straight. They passed the window; they were laughing, and Hil was holding a drink. That was when I decided I'd better telephone him first."

"So you went away from the place?"

"Yes, just as that horrible music started. I went to a telephone booth in

the drugstore on the corner and dialed the number. When Hil answered, I just began spilling my brains out. Oh, it was terrible, the things I said, calling her dirty names and telling him she was two-timing him—”

“You knew that?” Ollin asked.

She nodded, a little shamefaced. “I had spied before. She used to go out with a gigolo-looking Latin in a long yellow car and one of those go-to-hell blue suits.”

Ollin asked, “Frequently?”

“I saw them twice.”

“Well, go on with your story. Last night—”

SHE WENT on unsteadily. “Well, I blurted out all I knew about her, and Hil didn’t say anything. At least, I didn’t hear a word from him. But then —then, all of a sudden that awful music, which I could hear playing all the time, came to an end, and there was a scream, a terrible scream. It wasn’t ‘whoopie,’ but it sounded a little like ‘yipee’ or ‘yeepee,’ and I guess it was ‘shee-pay,’ Xipe, the name of that horrible Aztec demon.”

“Well? You went back to the place?”

She sat up, tears falling from her eyes. “I started to, but I just couldn’t. I ran out of that place and came on home.”

Ollin took a deep breath. “That’s what you mean by saying you were guilty of her death? You mean it was the things you told Kern that caused him to kill her?”

“Oh, my God!” the girl sprang from her chair. “I didn’t say that! I think it was the other man, the gigolo, who killed her. Hil was still at the telephone when that cry sounded.”

Ollin shook his head. “No sale. You admitted Kern didn’t speak. How can you say he was still holding the phone? What he did was leave the receiver hanging while you were still talking and go back into that room and cut the girl’s throat.”

“No, no,” she sobbed. “Anyhow, Hil wasn’t himself.”

“That may be true,” Ollin said. “May-be he wasn’t. By the way, was he in the habit of mixing laudanum with his liquor?”

Siddington spoke up, “Hil never needed any drug in his liquor to go off his head. But you haven’t proved he did it yet.”

“When I catch him, he’ll probably confess,” Ollin said. “About that cry, assuming it was the name of the god, Xipe, she cried out, I can see only one reason she might have done so. She and Kern were, presumably, enacting an ancient ritual, she playing the victim, he the priest. Calling the god’s name was probably the climax of the grisly drama. So, it’s possible that when Kern came back from the telephone and advanced on her with his knife, the poor girl thought it was merely a part of the play —until too late.”

Edna Ferry shuddered; Siddington hung his head. Ollin went on, “Anyhow, I’m going to try to find somebody else who may have heard that music and the cry. Some passer-by may have heard it. I’m going to broadcast that recording over the radio—”

Siddington jerked his head up. “No! You must not do that.”

Ollin was startled. “Eh? You mean that you do believe Kern’s theories about the effect that music has?”

Siddington said, in a low tone, “I believe in the effect it may have on Hilary. As I said, nothing is proved on him. But if it should happen that, in a moment of derangement— Well, the music may have had something to do with it in his case. He’s still at large. To provoke those mad instincts again would be criminal!”

Ollin said, “If he’s a madman, he’s got to be caught somehow. At least, it might cause him to give himself away.”

Siddington stood up. “I’ll have nothing to do with it. And don’t say I didn’t warn you. Now, if you’re through with Miss Ferry for the time being I’d like to take her home. She needs rest and possibly a doctor.”

When they had gone, Ollin took up his telephone and called a local radio station. Arrangements were easily made. The public was already curious about the mysterious “murder music” the papers had mentioned, and the manager was glad to oblige. The music, and an appeal from the police, could be broadcast at nine o’clock.

V

HIILARY KERN awoke in complete darkness, with a throbbing head and a crushing weight of fear on his chest. He lay, breathless, reconstructing his last hazy memories—the yellow car snaking through the narrow streets of the Mexican town, a stop in a sheltered patio, the dim interior of a pawn shop they had passed through into a barn-like room that seemed full of musical instruments of all sorts and where he had collapsed on a battered couch and passed out.

With an effort, Kern sat up. Blades of pain stabbed behind his eyes; he panted like a sick animal.

"You want somethin'?" a voice asked from the darkness.

"You're damned right—a drink—and fast!"

A shaded light went on. Fausto Azul was seated on a stool before a piano; a table holding the lamp and a radio was beside him. His sky-blue coat was off now, and the twin bands of scarlet suspenders made double slashes across his white shirt front, the left one almost touching a chamois shoulder holster from which the butt of an automatic protruded. Smiling, he reached for a tray that held a bottle and glasses, poured a drink, and carried it over.

Kern grasped it with shaky hands. The glass knocked awkwardly against his teeth, but he tilted it and let the liquor run, hot and astringent, into his throat. Shivering, he began to look about.

In a far shadowy corner of the room he could see more musical instruments, music racks, a microphone, and other apparatus. Azul handed him a second drink. He started to take it, but instead, leaned forward and set the glass on the floor. He looked at Azul.

"I've seen you before," he said. "Wait—aren't you Liria's cousin who came to take her to her mother's once?"

Azul went back and sat on the piano stool. "No cousin," he said cheerfully. "Just old friend. For a long time I do not see Liria. Then, by accident, I meet her. 'Hola, chiquita, where you been, what you doing?' 'Oh, I doing fine, I

work for Mestaire Kern, who collects the music.' *Diablo!* Kern, you say? Bot I work for heem myself—" he broke off in peals of laughter.

"You?" Kern bristled. "You work for me?"

Azul sobered, leaned forward. "You steel got money, no?"

"Money? What if I have? What's it to you?"

Azul's black eyebrows came up until they almost met his low hairline. "Bot, you need the help! I geeve you the help, all the help you need. So you pay me. Is fair, no?"

Kern said, "I can pay for what I get. But what's this all about? What happened to Liria? Why are they hunting me?"

Azul weighed him with shrewd eyes. "You do not joke? You do not know you get droonk and keel Liria?"

Kern's breath stopped, and the angry denial that had sprung to his lips died there. He felt cold and weak, and his brain groped in a fog, trying to recall. Bits of memory came back, and he muttered aloud, "I don't know, something happened— Wait! We were there at her apartment. I was hopped up over getting that record and I took a drink to celebrate. I took another. She put on the costume to dance to the music. I got out the knife to play the priest's part. We put the record on the phonograph. Then—"

Azul leaned nearer. "Well? Then, for some reason you get mad, keel Liria? Liria tell you something make you mad?"

"What should she tell me?"

Azul shrugged. "I ask you. Maybe so she tell you somebody make the beeg fool out of you?"

KERN frowned, then snapped his fingers. "No! *She* didn't. But somebody else did. It was a phone call. I was pretty drunk, but I went and answered it, and this other girl began to tell me—"

"What?"

"Why," Kern said, a little startled at the other's avid interest, "she told me Liria was two-timing me."

"So you get mad, kill Liria?"

"For that?" Kern laughed harshly.

"Oh, no. I never loved Liria. It was this other girl I loved. Only she quit me, and—"

"Thees girl don't tell you nothing else?"

"What else?" He grinned suddenly. "You mean did she tell me Liria was stepping out with you?"

Azul never batted an eye. Obviously he was more worried about something else. Kern's eyes swept the shadowy room, lingered on the musical instrument. Some were old and strange looking. A hollow feeling stole into his stomach.

"Say!" His eyes swung to Azul. "What do you know about a man named I. Tezcat in Mexico City?"

The tension broke as Azul began to laugh. At the same time he casually removed the automatic from its holster.

"So! Liria did tell you?"

"She did not. It's just dawned on me. So that's what you meant when you told Liria you worked for me too! You were in with Tezcat, swindling me, weren't you? Those recordings I paid such prices for were made right here in this room!" He rose threateningly.

Azul merely chuckled. "Sit down, Señor. Is no good you get mad now. These music you buy, ees good. Me, I know music." He tapped his low brow. "Folk music, classical—all. I take a leetle this, a leetle that, put together. Is genius!"

"Genius, hell! It's just that I'm a damned trusting fool, or you'd never have taken me in with your faked trash!"

"Trash?" Azul scowled. "Ah, no, amigo, you know yourself thees music got power. You say you no mad at Liria. Why you keel her, then?" He showed his white teeth. "Is the *Ochpaniztli Chant*!"

"Rot!" Kern growled. "I did believe in the stuff, but not now. I see the whole thing now. Liria wasn't in the deal, at first, was she? But she met you and learned about the swindle. Then she threatened to tell me. So probably it was you who killed her last night."

"You see me there maybe?" Azul challenged.

"I didn't," Kern admitted, feeling the cold sweat running down his face now.

"It must have happened while I was at that telephone. Yes, there was a cry. Liria cried out something. If I could only remember what it was, maybe it would tell me—" He clenched his fists, looked down helplessly at the floor. "Why would I have killed her? I didn't know about the swindle then. No, I didn't. I had no reason to—"

"Is the chant, the death chant," Azul insisted. "Thees music not all faked, amigo. Me, I am a Zapotec. When I am a *nino*, I hear those old tunes, remember, put them into music when I make it to sell to you. See, I got the ancient instruments. Indian orchestra I got too—not commercial—Indian girls. Work daytime other jobs. When I want to make recording, I call them." He whipped a black notebook from his pocket and tapped it. "All Indian girls, all keep quiet. They come here and we make music in thees soundproof room."

"What about this fellow, I. Tezcat?" Kern asked.

Azul shook his head. "For tell you that, amigo, you will pay me plenty moneys. Bot, I help you to escape, too. Is easy. I got friends. I help you get away to far south, Oaxaca. Is fair?"

A TRAPPED-ANIMAL look of hatred was in Kern's eyes as he stared at Azul. That his case was desperate, he knew now. But to accept the offer, run away, would be to admit his guilt as Liria's killer. It would also put him into the hands of this young scoundrel who blandly admitted swindling him of thousands, who flaunted the proof of it at him, the proof that was probably in that black notebook.

Kern had an impulse to rush him, to pit the stone knife in his pocket against the gun. What checked him was his own sick uncertainty as to what had happened to Liria . . .

"If I could only remember what she cried out," he grated. "It seems it had some meaning for me then. But some shock has blacked it out." He got up unsteadily, walked to the wall nearest him, and stood there, pretending he was at the telephone listening to Edna Ferry's hysterical accusations. "Now, if I could hear the music that was playing—"

"Can hear," Azul said. "Police announce they broadcast it at nine. Is a little past nine now, bot—" he hesitated—" bot maybe thees music make you crazy again, and you try to keel me. So I warn you, I shoot." He stepped to the small radio and snapped a button. A low throb of drums began to fill the shadowy room.

Instantly Kern felt a chill run through his nerves. It was as if the drumbeats were seeping through the pores of his skin, numbing him to all human feeling, while some giant hand lifted him completely out of the present and set him down in the death room where he had been last night.

Time itself seemed to dissolve as the music breathed on, mounting from an agony of grief to a wild yearning for the release of violence; and while he waited for memory to evoke Liria's cry, a nameless hate was rising in him, too.

The flutes were speaking now, the drums beginning to sound like dry bones rattling against each other. Once, behind him, Kern thought he heard the sound of a door being opened, but he did not turn. The music was nearing its end; he seemed suspended in the very heart of a tornado. Then the tension snapped, and he was turning.

So many things happend, all at once that he was never sure just which came first. But there was a shot, sudden darkness, and a shrill cry which still echoed in his ears as he raced, knife in hand, through the darkness. It was Azul's voice, and it sounded very much like, "Shee-pay! Don't—"

At any rate, its effect on Kern was like the touch of a charged wire, dissolving all his hesitancy and uncertainty in a savage singleness of purpose. He remembered last night, knew what he must do.

The overturned table tripped him. Lurching forward, he lashed blindly with the knife, heard a groan blend with his own wordless cries. Then his head struck something hard, and utter blackness enfolded him.

He came out of it with the feel of a body under his, with the stickiness of blood on his hands and face. He ran his hands over the dead face of Fausto Azul with complete indifference. His teeth

were gritted, his mind a steel cold instrument without feeling now. He fumbled for the knife he had dropped, found it, and stood up. Striking a match, he located the door.

Seconds later he was slinking into an alley with the stealth of a jungle cat, getting his bearings by the glow of distant lights, heading in the direction of the river.

VI

MANY people heard the *Ochpaniztli Chant* that night—in homes, in taverns and night clubs, in cruising automobiles. Due perhaps as much to its evil associations as to the music itself, a sort of universal shudder ran through Frontera, Monteverde, and the neighboring countryside. Then it subsided, and there was an interval of quiet.

Inspector Ollin had waited hopefully in his office, but no witnesses had come forward to admit having heard the strange music before. Ollin was in a bad temper, troubled and uneasy.

It was ten-thirty, an hour and a half after the broadcast, when the first report came in. In the industrial section of Frontera, near the river, a young girl, Guadalupe Hernandez, a laundry employee, had been lured or dragged into an alley near her home and brutally murdered. Her throat, in fact, had been neatly and swiftly cut. No one had seen the killer.

Ollin hurried to the place, but there was little to be done beyond setting in motion the routine of questioning the whole neighborhood. All available detectives were on this job when the second alarm flashed.

In the smelter section, Marguerita Puig, a waitress, had left her place of employment after receiving a telephone call. She had been dragged into the salt cedars only a few hundred yards distant and butchered in the same swift and efficient way. Like the other victim, she had not been assaulted, and a ring on her finger and money in her purse proved that robbery had not been the motive, either.

The first murder had chilled Inspector Ollin to the bone; now he began to feel real panic. Detectives were pulled out

of bed, police summoned back into harness. The entire force of prowlers was detailed to patrol the tougher sections of town.

It was, therefore, ironical that the third alarm should come from a swank section of the city. Here a housemaid, Ofelia Ramirez, had been murdered in her room in the servant's quarters above the garage. Her throat also had been cut, and again the swift-moving killer had escaped unseen.

Panic broke like a storm. The whole police force was called on duty, and the fire department stood by, armed. Whipped up by frenzied radio announcers, vigilante groups were forming, and already three people had received minor wounds from accidentally discharged firearms.

Returning to headquarters from the scene of the third tragedy, Inspector Ollin, haggard and exhausted but with his jaw still jutting sharply, walked right into a delegation composed of the mayor, the police commissioner, the editor of the leading newspaper, and a representative of the local clergy.

"On whose advice did you play that recording over the radio?" the commissioner demanded without preliminaries.

"On my own," Ollin said, "and against advice. But you surely don't believe that started this murder carnival?"

"It sounds crazy," the commissioner admitted, "but it did start after that broadcast. All these crimes resemble the one last night which happened when that music was first played. So the music seems the only connecting thread between these butcheries."

OLLIN said, "That's true. We don't know if these girls even knew each other or not. They certainly weren't known to run around together. There's just one thing—" he paused—"and that drags in the damned music again. Every one of these girls was a musician."

"Musician!" said the police commissioner. "Well, have you checked with local musical organizations?"

"They didn't belong to any union," Ollin said. "They seem to have belonged to some sort of amateur group in Monteverde."

"Well, find out about it. Meanwhile,

we can't take any further chances with this maniac, Kern. All evidence points to him, and you'd better order our men to shoot on sight— You don't agree?"

Ollin had looked down at the floor, frowning. Now he said, hesitantly, "It's just that all the evidence is still circumstantial, sir. All signs are against Kern. But he hasn't been seen, and he hasn't had a chance to speak for himself. If he's shot on sight, he never will."

"Well, what do you propose?"

"There's one thing," Ollin said, "I'd like to try first. This fellow Prof. C. P. Siddington is Kern's best friend, seems to have the most influence over him. Assuming Kern is deranged, some part of his mind might respond to an appeal from Siddington if the professor asks him to come in and surrender and promises him a square deal."

The commissioner frowned. "Well, try it. But I warn you, Ollin, if this maniac gets away with another killing, your resignation will not just be in order, it'll be required."

Brooding over that ultimatum, Ollin went to a telephone and called Siddington's apartment. Getting no answer, he decided to drive out to the place.

But Siddington was not at home, and occupants of neighboring apartments said he had not been in since leaving a little before dark. Evidently, Ollin concluded, the professor had not been home since that conference at headquarters. He left a request for him to call headquarters when he did come in and started back.

As he walked toward his car along a hedge-bordered path, Inspector Ollin passed within three feet of Hilary Kern. Crouched like a hunted beast behind the shrubbery, Kern was gripping the obsidian knife and fighting to control the spasmodic rasping of his breath. His feverish eyes followed Ollin until the latter got into his car. Then he scuttled from hiding and watched the fading tail-light vanish down the street. When the police car failed to turn at the street which led to Edna Ferry's boarding house, Kern drew a breath of relief.

Motherly Mrs. Magruder tapped at Edna Ferry's bedroom door, then opened it and stepped inside. The girl, seated near the window, under a shaded

lamp, did not turn, did not move. The salmon pink of her negligee made her face and her folded hands look even whiter.

"Tsk, tsk," Mrs. Magruder clucked, shuffling nearer with the tray on which were soft boiled eggs, toast, and milk, "you must get some rest, honey. Try to eat a bite and then take a couple of those sleeping pills the doctor gave you." She nodded at a green bottle on the table near the lamp. "Maybe they'll help you sleep."

Edna Ferry nodded dully, but did not turn. Mrs. Magruder set the tray down, eyed her a moment sadly, then tiptoed out.

Edna shifted her gaze to the dial of the clock on the dresser. Twelve-twenty. At about this time last night—

A slight breeze rustled the window to her left. Faint crawling sounds came from the vines that grew up and around the window. Edna turned her head slowly—and froze.

The face that stared at her from the square of darkness was Hilary's and it wasn't Hilary's. Under the familiar limp blond hair, it was the face of a hunted animal, the eyes bloodshot above dark pouches, the flesh drawn tight over the cheekbones, the teeth bared as the breath labored through them.

EDNA could feel herself rising from her chair, screaming in shrill repeated peals. But suddenly, with horror, she realized that she had not moved, had not uttered a sound, that she could not!

He swung his lank frame over the sill of the window, and she saw the knife in his hand as he crouched there uncertainly, trying to force his ravaged face into a smile, saying in a horrible, wheedling tone, "Edna, don't scream, please."

She could hear distinctly every rasp of his breath as he moved nearer, but her own nerves and muscles were locked as in a casque of ice. She was trying to scream, trying to move, and she couldn't!

Then, from a corner of her eye, she glimpsed the small green bottle. Reaching before she thought, she was surprised that her hand obeyed her, flipping

off the cap, spilling the yellow capsules into her palm.

Kern stopped but only for a moment, one hand reaching toward her. "Edna, for God's sake, don't. Wait, listen to me!"

Her voice came then, a feeble screech. "Go back, Hil. Go back or I'll take them all!"

"But, Edna, I've got to talk to you. There's no one else I can turn to." But as she half rose, slapping a palm against her mouth, he sprang.

She fell back into the chair, and he missed with his frantic grab. Then a sound from behind checked him, spun him around. A second figure had vaulted through the window, and Kern found himself staring into the narrowed eyes of Prof. C. P. Siddington, into the shiny muzzle of an automatic in the latter's hand.

"Easy, Hil—" Siddington was speaking fast—"don't make me shoot. I've been guarding Edna's window since dark. I thought you'd come here. Now get your hands up. I'm still your friend, but you're out of your mind, and I can take no chances—"

Kern sprang at him, knife raised. But Siddington had anticipated that. Ducking to one side, he evaded the murderous arc of the knife, then brought the barrel of the automatic into crashing contact with Kern's temple. Kern was thrown to one side and when he tried to regain his balance, the wiry Siddington was inside the sweep of his arms, slamming the gun like a riveter's hammer against Kern's skull.

Kern fought like a crazed animal, but the first blow had stunned him, and the fusillade which followed sent blood into his eyes. He wallowed to the floor, blind, gasping, racked with stunning pain. In a final effort, he tried to fling himself toward the window, but the tormenting hammer blows caught him, beat him down into an inert senseless heap.

VII

THE FIRST thing Kern was aware of when his senses returned was the cut of the cold handcuffs which shackled his wrists behind him and forced him to lie

In a cramped position on the hard floor. Someone was speaking. He recognized Siddington's voice and lay still and listened.

"... no use trying to deny his guilt now, I suppose," the professor was saying, "but he should be taken to a mental hospital at once."

"Not so fast," a gruff, official voice replied. "I'm not ready to admit it's a mental hospital he should go to, after all. I did think so after the apparently senseless killing of those girls tonight. But when we found the dead body of Fausto Azul in that room where the faked recordings which were sold to Kern seem to have been made, things began to look different, more rational. Finally, when it turned out that those girls were members of the orchestra which the swindlers used, I began to think an insanity motive wasn't needed."

"But even," Siddington said, "if you assume he killed them in revenge for being swindled, how do you explain the murder of Liria Baeza? You assume she was in on the swindle, too?"

"Don't know. She could have been."

"Well, but Edna—why should he attempt to kill her if he's sane?"

"We don't know," Ollin said slowly, "that he did. It may be that Miss Ferry was so terrified at sight of Kern that she swallowed those pills without waiting to learn his intentions. Luckily you were near enough to have her rushed to the hospital at once. By the way, why were you so sure that Kern would come here that you were willing to wait out there in the dark for hours, as you say?"

"Just a matter of understanding his psychology," Siddington said. "He was in love with Edna all along, of course. It was her rejection which turned him to the other girl. But sooner or later a man in his mental condition will come back to the object of his real love, only he may come in hate, blaming her for what he feels she has driven him to do."

The words hung in the air while the inspector appeared to be considering. Kern lay still, anxious to hear the rest of it. From beneath lowered lids he could see that a number of men, some in uniform, were in the room. He was thankful they had got Edna to the hos-

pital in time; that was the one thought which sustained him now.

Siddington was speaking again. "But the point is, Inspector, that Hilary may need medical care at once. I insist on calling an ambulance. I will stay with him every moment and vouch for his not escaping. Since there was laudanum found in that whiskey last night—"

"Oh, yes, that laudanum," Ollin said. "It's a point that hasn't been cleared up. Why do you suppose that the bottle and one glass—one only-contained laudanum while the other glass contained pure whiskey? Also, why were no fingerprints, except Kern's, found on either the bottle or the glasses?"

"I don't know," Siddington replied, "and it seems a trivial—"

"Not so trivial," Ollin said quickly, "that a good defense lawyer couldn't make something of it. For instance, he might say that Kern didn't put the laudanum into the whiskey, that is wasn't in there at the time the pure glass of whiskey was poured, the time, that is, when Kern and the girl were drinking together. He might say that somebody else came in while Kern was outside at the telephone, that this somebody killed the girl, put the laudanum in the bottle, then wiped the bottle and both glasses just to make sure his prints weren't on them. Then he might say that Kern came in, poured himself a drink from the drugged bottle, and became so crazed he didn't know what he was doing."

"But who could this someone be?"

"Well, there's still this fellow I. Tezcat, who sold Kern the recordings."

"But I assumed that Fausto Azul was doing that, using the name Tezcat, and a forwarding address in Mexico City."

WITH a nod of agreement Ollin said, "Someone here was using a forwarding address in Mexico City, I'm fairly sure, and Azul must be the man who directed the making of the music. But I can't quite picture him as knowing enough ancient Aztec history to fool a specialist like Kern. Whoever did that had to know the Aztec language, too. Also, could Azul have got the combination of Kern's safe, in order to steal the records?"

"Kern must have done that himself."

"But why? He had no reason. On the other hand, the man who engineered the swindle had an excellent reason to get the phony records and destroy them because they were the proof of his swindle. Also they might have given clues to his identity. For the very same reason, our defense lawyer might say, the mastermind—I, Tezcat, or whoever he is—had an excellent motive for murdering those girl musicians. He would, in fact, have been forced to it, by the fact that I had that *Ochpaniztli Chant* broadcast. Up to then, they may not have known there was any connection between the murder of Liria Baeza and the strange music they had been hired to make secretly at those gatherings in Monteverde. But once they heard that recording broadcast, and the appeal from the police, they would have known, and might quite likely have come forward to identify, not only Azul, but the man who was Azul's boss, too. So you see, he may have killed Azul, and then the girls, to silence them."

Siddington said, "Well, you're giving us some good hints to build Hil's defense on. Only I don't quite see how the murder of Liria Baeza fits in."

"We could make a guess," Ollin said. "We could imagine, for instance, that Liria was not originally in on the swindle. Her mother mentioned that she hadn't seen Fausto Azul in years but met him again a few weeks ago. At that time, Liria might have learned about the way Kern was being taken in. She may then have threatened to tell Kern and demanded money to keep quiet. She may have kept on demanding money from our mastermind until, last night, instead of making further payments, he decided to kill her and did."

"And Kern didn't see him?"

"Kern had to go outside to the end of the hall to the telephone. You might assume that the killer had been watching the place, that he had with him the laudanum which he had perhaps intended to use in silencing Liria. But suddenly, Miss Ferry arrives on the scene. The lurking killer sees her start to go in, then change her mind and go to the telephone booth at the corner. He naturally guesses that she must be calling Kern. He knows where the telephone

is; he also knows the girl's apartment, and how to get in by the back stairs. He hurries up. The girl is not alarmed; she knows him and, perhaps, thinks he has come to pay her more hush money. This gives him a chance to slip the drug into the drink. Then he kills her; she has only a chance for one short scream. He hurries out then, knowing that the first thing Kern will do, when he returns and finds the girl dead, will be to grab a drink to steady himself. He will get the drugged whiskey and become so crazed by it that he may not even be able to remember later what happened—whether he himself had killed the girl or not. Even if he should remember, his actions while under the drug will have incriminated him deeply."

"Is this just an hypothesis?" Siddington asked. "Or do you believe it?"

"I think it's very probably what happened," Ollin replied. "It's why I'm hoping Kern may be able to recall something about last night, which might help put the finger on the real killer."

"Let's hope so," Siddington said in a low tone. He stepped toward Kern.

FROM beneath lowered lashes, Kern saw Siddington kneel beside him in such a way that his body shielded Kern's head from the others. Siddington's hand came out and stroked his brow; he spoke gently, "Hil, old boy, maybe there's still a chance for you—"

Then Kern glimpsed, in Siddington's left hand, a small oblong of paper with a pile of white crystals in its fold. It was being shoved toward him, it was almost touching his lips—

Kern stiffened in panic. His hands were bound behind him, and he did not know how quickly he would be able to move without their aid. If the white crystals were cyanide of potassium, as he guessed they were, a lethal dose might be between his lips before he could fling his head away. And if he opened his mouth to cry out—

But he had to risk it. He gathered his breath and yelled what Azul had yelled before he died. It sounded like "Shee-pay! Don't—"

Siddington jumped back as if he had been slapped. The white crystals spilled to the floor, and the professor's right

hand moved toward the gun in his pocket. But Kern, anticipating that, made a wild lunge and seized his wrist between his teeth. He hung on like a bulldog until the police got hold of Siddington and dragged him away.

They did not, however, drag him far. During the struggle Siddington managed to free one hand and fish from his pocket another paper of the white crystals. Before they could stop him, the deadly cyanide was in his mouth.

EDNA FERRY lay in her hospital bed, weak but smiling.

"I hope you'll forgive me for doubting you even for that instant, Hil," she said, "but I was a nervous wreck, and it had been dinned into me that you were a maniac until I didn't know what to think."

"I must have looked like one," Kern said, "after what I'd been through, wading the river, dodging the police and mobs of searchers. But I had to come to you. I knew who the killer was then—had known ever since Azul was killed in that room in Monteverde—"

"You saw him there?"

"No, not there nor last night, either. When he killed Azul, he fired from the door. I had heard it open, but he shot the light out, and I didn't see him. But I had heard Azul's scream. It was the same thing Liria had screamed, and it brought the memory back to me. I knew what the cry meant then, too."

"You mean Xipe's name?"

Kern shook his head. "Not the demon's name, the killer's. Or rather his initials, which he used as a given name."

Edna gasped. "It was 'C. P.' his victims screamed?"

"Of course. As simple as that. Only the letters weren't pronounced 'see-pee,' as we pronounce them, but 'see-pay,' as a Mexican would pronounce them. The Spanish *p*, as you know, sounds like 'pay.' And since there's practically no difference in the way 'see-pay' and 'she-pay' sound when yelled, it was naturally thought that Liria had yelled the demon Xipe's name."

"Did you think that was what she yelled when you heard it last night?"

Hil frowned. "Honestly, I can't be sure. But I think I suspected it was

really Siddington's name she was yelling then. Only I didn't see him, and it was such a horrible shock that my mind probably wanted to evade it, and that helped the liquor and the drug make me forget what it was she had screamed. But it was there all the time, of course, beneath the surface. When I heard that music played again and right on top of it, Azul screaming the same thing at his killer, I no longer had any uncertainty about it. The problem then was to find someone who would listen to me."

"Well, I failed you," Edna said. "I suppose I shou'd have suspected Siddington myself. But he was very careful to keep his operations hidden from me and make such a show of being your friend that I was fooled. The fact that he was so ready to bleed you and even cooked up that story about the nonexistent I. Tezcat in such a hurry, proves that he never did have any scruples. Only I don't think murder was a part of the original plan."

"Nor I," Kern said. "But if he'd been able to keep on bleeding me a few more years, he wouldn't have had to murder anybody—not for money. Of course, if I had died some other way, he'd have been able to steal what he wanted while managing the project set up in my will. No, the murder was more or less forced on him and all because Liria found out what was going on and started blackmailing him. So he killed her and then he had to kill the others to cover up his first murder."

"Inspector Ollin had better get some of that thanks, too," Edna said, "for the good old virtue of not being hasty. The newspapers, of course, are handing him plenty of praise, but I think we owe him a personal debt, too." She smiled. "May be a big slice of wedding cake."

Kern opened his eyes wide. "Well, well. To make a wedding cake, I've heard, you first get your—Say! Is this a proposal, young lady?"

Edna's eyes flashed at him teasingly. "No, sir, it's just a plain statement, so you needn't start mauling me. You've got to have either a wife or a guardian and since I've got a sort of priority, or used to have—"

The rest was smothered by a kiss she couldn't duck. Nor did she try. •••

YOU PLAY THE DETECTIVE

A Quiz By JOE WALSH



THE solution to a murder often hinges on the most minute discrepancy in testimony given either by suspects or by witnesses involved in the case. An unguarded word, an accidental discovery gleaned more or less from some seemingly irrelevant fact or facts often provides the difference between the solved and the unsolved.

So it is, for example, in the mythical case that follows, bringing together Chief of Detectives Paddy Hogan and Lieutenant Morrow of homicide in the act of questioning squat, beefy John Barrows, believed to be the only witness in the death of wealthy Gerald G. Wilson on Tuesday, April 13, at 7:30 P.M.

John Barrows, seated calmly before the two policemen, admits that it was he who discovered Wilson's body and notified local authorities.

"You claim that his death was suicide, but evidence indicates that Wilson was murdered," the chief told Barrows. "Give us all the details you can."

Barrows fidgeted nervously in his chair. "I tell you it was suicide," he insisted. "As I was walking past Wilson's house, I saw him seated in his chair. I was about to glance away when he raised a revolver to his head and fired."

"What did you do then?" said Chief Hogan evenly.

"I rushed to the door and rang the bell, but no one answered," was the reply.

"Go on," urged his questioner.

"I went around, trying the windows. I finally located one that was unlocked in the rear of the house and climbed inside."

Lieutenant Morrow coughed, clearing his throat before injecting a question.

"What did you do after that?" he demanded.

"I made my way with some difficulty to the room where Mr. Wilson killed himself," said Barrows.

"It was from there that you telephoned headquarters, wasn't it?" suggested Hogan. Barrows nodded.

"How did you know where the telephone was?" Lieutenant Morrow snapped.

"When I first opened the door of the room and turned on the light, I saw it," he said.

Lieutenant Morrow reached out a hand and fingered a large rent in the pocket of Barrows' coat. "How did you tear this?" he inquired.

"Climbing in the window," said Barrows.

"I believe you said you saw no one leave the house," continued Chief Hogan.

"No one at all," Barrows agreed.

A swift exchange of glances between Chief of Detectives Paddy Hogan and Lieutenant Morrow was missed by Barrows as the witness fished a hand into his pocket and extracted a pack of cigarettes. He was lighting one leisurely, confidently, when the former rose and moved from behind his desk.

"The crime lab," said Hogan, "has determined that Wilson's death was not suicide. It's murder! And since you alone are the only known witness to it, Barrows and since there is one big inconsistency in your statements, I'm compelled to hold you, on suspicion of murder!"

What was the inconsistency in Barrows' story that prompted Chief of Detectives Hogan to jail Barrows on the charge? The answer can be found on page 120.

*When Rick came to the wedding—
his bride was missing!*



He felt himself
being dragged
across concrete

DOOM for the GROOM

by R. VAN TAYLOR

HESENITANTLY Rick Fraser dropped the phone back into its cradle. His tall, strong frame felt lifeless and limp like the aged curtains hanging across the double doorway to the liv-

ing room of the minister's home where the others were waiting. He tried to tell himself that things like this didn't happen to detectives.

As he stood there the curtains parted,

and a suave looking man in an immaculate gray suit stepped into the hall. There was a white carnation in his lapel, and the toes of his tan shoes glowed like mirrors.

"Any luck?" he asked.

Rick grimaced. "A busy signal is all I get. She must have her receiver off the hook. . . . Scott, I've got a feeling that something's bad wrong."

Scott glanced at his wrist watch. "It's passed three-thirty," he said. "Kay's over an hour late." Slowly his expression turned from one of concern into one of sympathy. "Rick, don't get yourself all worked up, now. Women are funny. Maybe—"

"I know you've got to be getting back to your office," Rick cut in. "No use to wait any longer. Drop me off at her place on your way back, will you?"

Scott nodded understandingly. "Sure," he said softly.

Rick grew uneasy as he thought about telling the minister and his wife that it was all off. They'd want to talk about it, and he'd have to tell them the whole story. The minister would want to know how long he had known this young lady, Kay Ryan, who had failed to come to her own wedding. Then he'd tell them: two of the fullest, most complete months of his life. Of course, the wife would shake her head sadly and mention the pitfalls of a hasty courtship. Then he would tell them that sometimes a short interval can be a very long time. The last hour, for instance, had been like a year.

How did he meet her? Official business. When he'd say that, he'd see the questions in their eyes and have to explain. He'd say that Scott Remley could tell them about this part because he was manager of the Eagle Distributing Company where Kay worked as a buyer. Two months ago a series of robberies had started at that firm; three of their trucks were hijacked and the cargoes of expensive gift items had vanished into thin air.

Rick had been assigned to the case. While working on it, he had seen Kay and asked about her, and Scott had introduced them. They fell in love—quickly and completely. It was a whirlwind romance, spotted between false leads on

the case and wild goose chases. Finally their romance climaxed, and they decided to get married. Now this seemed to be the biggest goose chase of them all.

Why?

RICK met Scott out at the curb and they climbed into Scott's maroon convertible. Scott gunned away from the curb.

Nervously Rick stuck a cigarette between his lips, jabbed the lighter. Scott glanced at him and said, "Take it easy."

It had a mocking sound to Rick. Take it easy! Did any man ever take it easy when his bride-to-be failed to show at her own wedding? Could you just shrug it off when you had a wedding ring in your pocket and railroad tickets to Miami for a honeymoon and a desire for a certain woman that went almost beyond desire and the whole damned works blew up in your face?

It worries a guy, makes him wonder about things.

The lighter in the dash snapped out, and its sound went through Rick like a knife. He took it out and touched it to the end of his cigarette. He'd always been proud of his nerves. They were like steel. He had looked death in the face and had not flinched.

He had to hold his cigarette with his other hand in order to light it.

"Rick, you've had too much strain lately," Scott said. "These robberies, the wedding—you've been in high gear too long."

Rick inhaled deeply on his cigarette, blew a gush of smoke into the windshield.

"Frankly," Scott went on, "these robberies have put me on edge, too. Oh, sure, as long as you keep men watching the trucks nothing happens, but as soon as you pull them off, one of our trucks get hijacked. It's as if someone on the inside of the firm is tipping the gang who's pulling these jobs as to just when the trucks are being watched. It's getting to where I don't even trust myself any more."

"You know the department is doing everything it can," Rick said a little irritably. "It's almost impossible to trace that kind of stolen goods. There are

too many outlets for it."

"I guess so."

Wrinkles appeared about Rick's eyes as he stared grimly ahead. "I'm just wondering if those robberies, or the work that I've done on them, has anything to do with this."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not quite sure myself," Rick answered abstractedly.

Scott let him off at the apartment house where Kay lived, and he went up to her flat. When Kay answered his knock, he went in quickly, almost roughly.

She stood half-turned, ready to walk away. Her long black hair hung to her shoulders, and a white blouse, which was tucked into a blue gabardine skirt, was full across her breasts and tapered to her small waist. Rick looked beyond her, through the door of the bedroom, and saw a suitcase lying on the bed. She had been crying.

He said, "What's it all about, Kay?"

She started to turn away but he caught her by the arm and pulled her to him. "It's no good, Rick," she said dejectedly.

"Let me decide that. Why didn't you come?"

"You'd be the laughing stock of the police department if you married me. I've got a record—spent two years in jail in Indiana. But when you're blinded by love you don't stop to think of the consequences of marrying someone it might hurt. That is, not until something happens."

HIS hands grew tighter on her arms. "What happened?"

"I had a visitor this morning—a stranger, never saw him before—but he knew about my jail sentence and threatened to tell Scott Remley unless I paid off. That's right, blackmail. Either my money or my job. Suddenly I was sick of it all. I knew that paying off wouldn't solve anything and I was afraid to tell you. With these robberies going on, it wouldn't look good if people knew I had a record. . . . I was crazy to think that it would ever work. I wouldn't want you to marry me now."

"What about this Indiana deal?"

"It was seven years ago. Just after

I got out of high school I got mixed up with a boy by the name of Red Keaton. He was crazy about me, and I was just young enough and dumb enough to be flattered, although I knew he was a petty crook and no good. One night I was out with him in his car when he drove into a filling station. I thought he was going to get some gas, but before I knew what happened he had robbed the place. They caught us, of course. No one believed my story, that I really didn't know what Red was going to do, so I got two years. I haven't seen him since."

"Why didn't you tell me all this before?"

Kay dropped her eyes. "I loved you, Rick. I kidded myself into believing that the past was the past and that it wouldn't affect us. But I was wrong."

Rick pulled her closer, tilted up her head and pressed his mouth against hers. Her arms encircled his neck, and he felt the warmth of her body against his. She tore her lips away, placed them close to his ear and whispered:

"Oh, darling, let's end it like this. Leave now while I still have my senses."

"End it!" Rick straightened up abruptly and gazed into her eyes. "It's just beginning—really beginning. What did this guy look like who tried to blackmail you?"

Doubtfully she began, "He had a glass eye, the left one, I believe. Average height and build, sort of a flashy dresser, greasy complexion. Why?"

Sternly Rick said, "Don't do anything until you hear from me. Promise me that you'll stay here—and keep this."

He handed her the envelope containing the ring and license. He kissed her again, hard, then went out and down the hall. He held up his clenched fists, glared at them and thought about a dirty blackmailer.

In the identification section of headquarters, he stood before a long row of steel filing cabinets, glancing from one end to the other and wondering where to begin. He was following a hunch, a strong one. This attempted blackmail of Kay sounded like a typical stunt pulled by a cheap, professional crook. A man with a glass eye wouldn't be too hard to locate, providing he could be found in

these files. But where to begin? It might take precious hours.

He rubbed his chin nervously. Then stepped to the files and started jerking open drawers.

If he had looked out of the window of the office, he would have seen a beautiful sunset which hung over the city like a brilliant canopy of red and gold and blue. But he wasn't. Cigarette dangling from his lips, he was staring down at a card on a table and fastening the collar of his shirt. *Sam Pitman. Elite Hotel.*

Subconsciously he took the cigarette from his lips, dropped it to the floor and mashed it beneath his foot, twisting at it violently.

SEVERAL hours later Rick sat across from the desk of Chief of Detectives McKinney. McKinney was a youthful fifty-five, had a build like a football player, short-cropped red hair and a face like a benevolent bulldog. Now he sat scowling at some penciled memos which he shifted from one big hand to the other.

Finally he said, without looking up, "Rick, I'm disappointed in you. You know the seriousness of withholding information."

Rick swallowed. The small, dark room was stuffy with cigar smoke and it was a labor to breathe. "Yes, sir," he said drily.

"Calling homicide was about all the cooperation you gave Lieutenant Hogan. Right?"

"Yes, sir."

"You realize that I could suspend you from the department?"

The muscles in Rick's jaws were flexing and unflexing. "Yes, sir."

McKinney tossed the memos aside and picked up a cigar butt. He took a couple of sputtering drags on it, screwed up his face in disgust, and hurled the butt into a wastepaper basket.

Rick shifted uneasily in his chair. Why didn't McKinney hurry up and get it over with?

"Rick, I'm going to run back over this deal very carefully," McKinney said seriously. "I want you to listen to it, put yourself in my shoes, and decide what you'd do with a guy like yourself

if you were me. And remember, I've got to save my own face and to hell with anybody else."

"You find Sam Pitman murdered in his room. You call homicide. When Hogan gets there, you tell him you were checking a lead on the Eagle robberies and that's how you happened to find Pitman. Hogan establishes how Pitman dies. He was first hit on the head with a metal pitcher and then a knife was driven into his throat, severing the jugular vein. He'd been dead for about an hour."

"Hogan gets hold of the guy who runs the joint. Between swallows from a bottle of beer the guy tells him that the knife was Pitman's. He also told him that about an hour ago a good looking blonde in a blue suit went up to his room, but that he didn't see her come back down. Then Hogan emptied Pitman's pockets and found a name and address. It was a woman's name, Kay Ryan. At this point you tell Hogan that you'll check this lead, and he tells you to lay off, that homicide's not in your department."

"Hogan checks the address, with you tagging along, and finds that the woman is not there. But from another tenant, who saw her leave the building, he learns that she worked at the Eagle Distributing Company and gets a description of her. The description matched the one he got from the hotel clerk. Then Hogan gets on the phone and calls Scott Remley, the manager of Eagle. He asks if a girl named Kay Ryan works for him."

"After listening for a moment, Hogan blew his lid. Red-faced, he hauled you down here and turned you over to me for action. He expects action. Now I ask you, after what you did to poor Hogan, what do you think I should do to you?"

Rick's mouth was dry. He patted his pocket for a cigarette, but there were none. He'd smoked them. Wetting his lips he said, "I told you the whole story when I first came in, chief. I was stringing along with Hogan until I could find out something. I was sick. I love Kay."

"You didn't answer my question."

Rick shrugged.

McKinney rose to his feet and glared

down at him. "I should crucify you, Rick," he said emphatically, "but your splendid record in the past keeps me from doing it. There's no use of going into the angles on this murder with you because you're not going to be around to stick your nose into it. I'm suspending you until this thing is cleared up. And just to make sure that you don't go nosing around, hand over all your identification right now. I mean it, Rick, keep out of this."

NIIGHT had gripped the city when Rick walked out of headquarters. Where was she? Wherever she was, she was in danger. He was sure of that. But how to trace her? Through Sam?

A cab cruised by. Rick jerked erect and whistled shrilly. It pulled over to the curb. He raced towards it and climbed in. Minutes later he stepped out onto the sidewalk not far from the Elite Hotel.

He started making a round of the bars. Go in and buy a beer. Take a sip. Ask the bartender in a loud voice if he knew Sam Pitman. Watch the customers.

Five blocks . . . ten blocks . . . fifteen blocks. Fifteen glasses of beer sitting on bars. Fifteen blanks.

In the sixteenth place he asked the bartender, "Sam Pitman been in here tonight?" From the corner of his eye he could see several faces down the bar turn towards him. His pulse picked up.

The bartender wiped a towel across the bar. "Don't know him," he said, turning away.

Rick picked up the beer and went over to a booth on the other side of the smoke filled room. He stretched out his long legs, lifted the glass to his lips and took a long drag. Over the edge of the glass he saw two men moving towards him.

One of the men was built like a bull, the other like a wire-haired terrier. Both flashy dressed to the point of bad taste. They slid in opposite Rick and watched him with cold, impersonal eyes. He set his beer down and wiped foam from the top of his lip.

Wire-haired asked, "Watcha want Sam for?"

"Things."

"You a copper?"

"No."

Rick took another drink, hoping to hide the cold sweat which was breaking out on his face while Wire-haired studied him through slitted eyes. Finally Wire-haired jerked his head at the entrance and the three of them got up and went outside.

Wire-haired motioned down the street and said, "Car's down this way. Come on."

Rick turned, and the back of his head felt as if it had been blown off. He pitched forward on the sidewalk. Rough hands went through his pockets, and then he felt himself being dragged across concrete. A car door opened and they tossed him in the back on the floor. The throbbing pain in his head became more acute as his senses returned.

It was an eternity before the car finally slowed down and turned into a long alley between two huge warehouses. At the end of the alley, they came to a stop, Bull got out of the car, raised a big door. Wire-haired backed the sedan rapidly into the building, and Bull lowered the door.

They pulled Rick out of the back, each got under an arm, and they started dragging him through the big warehouse. Rick's heart pounded furiously when he saw the stacks and stacks of boxes in the dim, diffused light.

They took him up some concrete stairs, onto a ramp, through a small office, and into a back room. They slammed him into a chair against the far wall. Through eyes which appeared closed, he saw Wire-haired go to another door at the end of the room. Bull went to a table in the center, sat on the edge of it and started cleaning his fingernails with a long knife.

SOON Wire-haired came back into the room. "There he is, boss," he said, nodding at Rick.

The boss walked into the room, and Rick felt eyes boring into him. The man was in his shirt-sleeves and wore a shoulder holster. A tuft of red hair stuck up in front of a blue snap-brim hat which rested on the back of his head. Slowly he walked to the table, picked up a pitcher of water and moved towards Rick.

The water almost drowned Rick and he flinched as the boss slapped at his face. "Come out of it, you bum!" the man ordered.

Rick opened his bloodshot eyes. Roughly the boss grabbed him by the lapels of his suit and shook him. "Who are you? Talk!"

Bull said thickly, "If he's a copper, we'll have to get rid of him. Maybe he's hooked Sam with those truck jobs."

"Shut up!" the boss snapped. "I'm going to cut your damned tongue out one of these days."

"I don't think he's a cop," Wire-haired cut in. "What'd he be doing with a couple of tickets to Miami? Nope, he was hooked up with Sam and that gang down there that's trying to muscle in on us. He probably knocked off Sam himself. You know how that dirty dog Sam was, always trying to come out on top. He might of tried to pull a fast one on this guy and got bumped off."

The boss grimaced. "I ought to have killed that rat myself," he said disgustedly. "Sam had big ideas. Big ideas."

"Sure, but that ain't telling us who this guy is. Wait a minute. Maybe he's on the inside of the Eagle Company. Sam would have wanted a man on the inside and he wouldn't have used the same connections we had."

The boss' face lit up. "Yeah. That's right. We might be soiling our hands for nothing, boys. If this guy is hooked up with Eagle, there's an easier way of finding out who he is than this."

Rick's breathing grew shallow as he watched the boss, smiling triumphantly, walk to the door he had come through. When he got there he looked into the other room and said, "C'mere."

Taut as the string on a violin, Rick sat there watching the open doorway. Then an unseen hand plucked that string, sending a shattering vibration through him.

Kay walked into the room.

"Did you ever see that guy before?" the boss demanded eagerly, pointing at Rick. "Try hard, sugar. This is important."

Rick looked straight into her eyes. Unconsciously he brought up his hand and wiped his mouth. Kay turned a

shade paler.

She held her hands tightly in front of her. Tensely she said, "No, Red."

A big chunk fell into place. *Red Keaton!*

Red rubbed his jaw and frowned. "Are you sure you haven't ever seen him before?" he asked again.

Her eyes blurred with tears. "I'm not sure of anything," she said hysterically. "All I know is that I got a telephone call to come to room twenty-six at the Elite Hotel. If I hadn't, someone I—I thought a lot of might have been hurt. So I went there and found a dead man. When I ran out of the hotel, your men jumped out of a car and grabbed me. You'd come to see that dead man, because after I'd told you what happened, you brought me here. Let me go, Red. Let me go!"

"Hold on, sugar!" Red said, grabbing her arm. "We don't know who this guy is so you don't want to be shooting off your pretty little mouth." He put his arms around her. Kay struggled to get loose, but he held her securely. He continued, "Besides, I'm not going to let you go after I've spent all this time looking for you. Sam found you before I did, but after what he tried to do to you, the dirty dog got what he had coming to him. I'll treat you good, sugar. I go for you. I always have."

COLD sweat popped out on Rick's face as he watched Red press his mouth against Kay's face. Her hands were pushing against his chest as she tried to lean away, but he was too strong for her.

Rick wanted to give Red a kiss, too. The kiss of death.

Arrogantly Red walked back across the room and stopped in front of Rick. Glaring down at him he said, "I just got a brilliant idea. We'll know who you are in a few minutes, mister. If we find out that you're hooked up with that Eagle outfit and was operating with Sam, then you're going to have lots of talking to do. And if you're a copper—" He slapped his hands together with a loud bang.

Rick watched him calmly, but blood was rushing to his head. Red went into the office that Rick had been brought

through. In a minute he was back. The corners of his mouth turned down in a sneering smile as he said to Rick, "Simple as a telephone call. Enjoy life while you can, buster. You may not be with us much longer."

It might have been fifteen minutes or thirty or an hour. Time had no meaning. Finally the door to the other office opened, and Red's face lit up with grim hope. Grunting happily, he disappeared behind the closed door of the office.

In a moment the door cracked just a fraction, then slammed shut loudly. Angry, mumbled voices came from the other side. There was some kind of trouble in there.

Wire-haired and Bull looked at each other with puzzled expressions. Rick got ready for the cold plunge.

He lunged forward like a rocket. He grabbed Wire-haired around the neck and dug for his shoulder holster. Bull raised his knife and dove at the struggling pair. Rick twisted with Wire-haired. Wire-haired screamed a warning, but too late. The knife plunged into his chest.

Bull drew back in amazed horror. Rick came up with Wire-haired's revolver as the hood folded. Bull came at him again with the bloodstained knife. Rick blasted him to a stop.

The door to the office jerked open. Red careened toward the room, swinging his automatic to Rick. An unseen gun roared from the office, and Red plunged forward as if he'd been kicked between the shoulders. He was shot in the back.

Rick yelled, "Get this, Kay!"

He slid Wire-haired's revolver across the floor, and it came to a stop by the door of the room where Kay was held. Then he snatched Red's automatic from the dying man's hand and charged through the office. When he hit the dark, upstairs ramp, a shot whined through the blackness. Rick dropped to the floor and scrambled for the concrete stairs.

At the top, he saw a dark figure rapidly moving toward the front of the warehouse. He squeezed off three shots, and the figure reversed its direction, ducking behind some boxes. Rick started down the steps in a crouched position. A gun roared and concrete chips splat-

tered his face. He vaulted over the steel railing, dropped to the floor ten feet below, and weaved through boxes to the other side of the building. The side that his man was on. The side by the alley.

The man probably had a car out in front, Rick thought. His problem was to keep him from getting to it and making a getaway and to keep himself from getting killed while doing it.

A gun cracked just as a dark shadow darted out from behind the boxes. Rick's automatic barked twice, then his heart leaped to his throat. The gun jammed.

He heard the big door in the rear being raised. He sped toward it and at the same time heard a man's footsteps beating up the long alley. Rick spied the black sedan that had brought him here. He jerked open the door, jumped behind the wheel and gunned the machine into life.

With the engine wide open in low gear, he roared out of the warehouse, made a screaming turn and headed for the running man. He switched on the lights. The man threw himself against the wall and emptied his gun at the car as it bore down on him. The windshield webbed out in front of Rick. He crashed into the wall as the man sprang away—too late. Scott Remley disappeared beneath the wheels.

AGAIN Rick sat across the desk from Chief McKinney. The chief studied him thoughtfully for a moment and then said, "You completely disregarded my orders, didn't you?"

Rick shifted in his chair uneasily. His head was throbbing from the gash he had got when he crashed into the wall, and the bandage around it was too tight. Now the chief was getting ready to cut him up some more.

"Yes, sir," Rick said.

"However," McKinney went on, "you did accomplish a few things. For instance, you didn't kill Scott Remley when you ran him down—just broke his legs—and since you had the goods on him, he confessed to his crimes after he was taken to the hospital, thereby removing all suspicion from your girl friend, Kay Ryan. That's all very well, but the remaining fact is that you did

all these things against my orders. Right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, I'll admit it was pretty smooth police work. Scott had himself a good deal. He was getting paid on both ends of the line. The company paid him to manage the outfit, and the gangsters paid him to tip them off on when to pull the robberies. Then things got fouled up when Red and Sam had falling out. Sam went to Scott and threatened to tell the police if he didn't pay off. That spurred Scott into action. He knew about the deal between Sam and Kay, so he used that to cover up the murder he had committed. Scott was the one who called Kay and told her to come to the Elite Hotel.

"But what climaxed the whole works was when Red called Scott to identify you. Scott saw Kay there, too, and told Red that she'd have to get the same medicine you were going to get because he realized that eventually she'd find out about him. Red said no, that he wanted her for his playmate. So Scott bumped him to preserve his safety.

"Yep, you uncovered all that information. We can even be on the lookout for that Miami gang if they start to move in here. But the fact remains that you did all these things against my orders. Now I ask you: what should I do about it?"

The cold-hearted, crummy bum, Rick thought. Bitterly he said, "I don't know."

McKinney pushed to his feet, grinning. "I'll think of something after you get your promotion. Now, get out of here and don't let me see you for two weeks."

Rick went out of there, smiling and thinking what a wonderful guy McKinney was. He met Kay in front of headquarters where she had been waiting, and together they found a cab and climbed into it.

"Step on it, mac," he told the driver. "This is an emergency."

The driver nodded. "Sure, but where to?"

Rick settled back with Kay in his arms. "Where do you think? The nearest preacher!"

• • •

DID YOU KNOW it is (or was)

AGAINST THE LAW—



- TO whistle at pretty girls in PEKIN, ILLINOIS?
- TO trap mice without a hunting license in CLEVELAND, OHIO?
- FOR dogs to fight with one another in SALIDA, COLORADO?
- TO annoy squirrels in TOPEKA, KANSAS?
- TO keep a lion as a pet in ALDERSON, WEST VIRGINIA?
- TO kiss in public in EGYPT?
- TO sell meat on the Sabbath in COLUMBUS, OHIO?
- TO smoke in bed in SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA?
- TO bathe on Sunday in MASSACHUSETTS?
- TO bet on the outcome of an election in KANSAS?
- FOR women to drive chariots in ROME?
- FOR men with mustaches to kiss anybody in INDIANA?

—Joseph C. Stacey

A Novel by DALE CLARK

This will SLAY you

I

AT THIS time every year, they had the same argument.

"Why anyone who's lucky enough to be at San Alpa," Endicott said, ruffled, "wants to go somewhere else, I can't understand!"

O'Hanna grinned. "It's my vacation, ain't it?"

O'Hanna, the house dick at San Alpa, was in his own room, packing — a process which consisted of throwing a lot of old clothes helter-skelter inside a suitcase. Heaven only knew where the guy ever got such a wardrobe. From the Salvation Army, it looked like, after the Salvation Army had had it refused by self-respecting hoboes.

It was funny. For O'Hanna, as he

stood there packing the case, made such a hell of a contrast to those disreputable duds. O'Hanna was a seventy-two inch, athletic fashion plate clad in nifty pencil stripes.

Assistant Manager Endicott repeated that he couldn't understand it. He reminded O'Hanna that San Alpa was a million-dollar, year-round resort hotel that had been built on the privately owned Southern California mountain-top for the purpose of catering to vacationists.

"What more do you want?" he demanded. "Besides 'the magic of pine-scented breezes blowing from majestic peaks to vernal valleys? Where you can watch the sun rise spectacularly out

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"Naughty," O'Hanna
said. "Not a bit nice!"



The pretty girl in that carousing millionaire's bedroom

closet was something really special. She bled—catsup!

of the nearby desert, and then, fun-filled hours later, watch it sink into the not-distant, blue bosom of the Pacific?"

The third man in the room looked interested. He asked, "Is that a fact? You can see the desert and the ocean both from here?"

The questioner was Fred Fencer, a private agency operative from Los Angeles. He had been hired to take over at San Alpa for the two weeks of O'Hanna's vacation. He was a short, stout, eye-glassed individual who might have been mistaken for a traveling salesman who had wandered into San Alpa by mistake, thinking the place a commercial hotel.

Endicott ignored him. Endicott was fanatic in his loyalty to San Alpa, sincerely believing that no finer resort hotel existed anywhere in the world. To prove it, he always spent his vacations right here. And he couldn't see why O'Hanna didn't do the same.

After all, he remarked now, San Alpa was good enough for the Hollywood film colony week-enders, the upper crust of California society, and the tourists with Wall Street addresses. "And they pay twenty dollars a day and up, for the privilege of being here."

O'HANNA'S Irish-blue glance darkened moodily. "You said it. What I need is a vacation from other people's gold-plated vacations."

He admired a pair of old canvas pants, wrinkled like a map of the Balkans, before folding the pants into his suitcase.

"This chromium-fitted bird cage is slowly driving me screwy," he said. "I'm losing my sense of humor. I'm getting so I can hear a waiter explain that half a grapefruit has gone up from sixty cents to six bits on account of national defense, and I don't even laugh."

Fred Fencer looked astonished. "Is that a fact? You people get seventy-five cents for half a grapefruit?"

O'Hanna said it was a fact. He said it was also a fact that the Hollywood week-enders, upper crust socialites and Eastern refugees from Wall Street liked to pay such prices.

"They can't enjoy anything unless it costs too much," O'Hanna said. "It's

contagious, too. I'm getting the same kind of ideas from them."

Endicott nudged his toothbrush of gray mustache with a thin forefinger. "Tut-tut," he reproached. "They're not all like that. Lots of rich people are real, genuine personalities. The majority of them are."

O'Hanna said, "I wouldn't know. A guy doesn't get to rub shoulders with the real ones in this house dick racket. It's always the phonies who get into the jams around here."

O'Hanna slammed his suitcase shut, bent his elbow, and consulted his strap-watch. "Six P.M. on the dot," he said, suddenly cheerful. "Here goes! I'm heading for financial circles where a quarter is still considered spending money, instead of a tip you blush to leave for the waiter. I'm going to mingle with the social element which shaves holding hands with a safety razor instead of a manicurist, who—"

The room phone rang, and O'Hanna swallowed the rest of his farewell speech. "You take it," he told Fred Fencer. "You're on duty, beginning ten seconds ago."

He yanked the suitcase straps in a hurry, hauled the suitcase off the bed, and started toward the door.

"Wait a minute," Fencer said, hand capped over the phone. "It's for you, personally. Somebody named Leland Cobb, in 402—and he says it's urgent, a matter of life and death."

"Leland Cobb," O'Hanna said. His flexible lips tailored a sudden, wide grin. "Well, I'm on my vacation—and having a wonderful time already! You tell him so, and tell him you're in charge."

"No!" cried Endicott, in anguish. He waved his thin hands at O'Hanna. "Please, Mike! If it was anybody else—but you know how Cobb is."

"Nuts," said O'Hanna.

"I'm asking you as a personal favor," the assistant manager implored.

"No soap."

Endicott said, "Mike, have a heart. Fencer is new here. It's his first night. You'll at least go along and help him, won't you?" He clutched O'Hanna's coat sleeve. "Where's your spirit of noblesse oblige, your loyalty to a fellow detective?"

O'Hanna looked at Fred Fencer's short, stout, neatly business-like self. "I'm a sap," he said bitterly. "I deserve all the hard luck I know I'm going to get out of this. But okay—come on."

They exited into the corridor.

"What's it all about?" Fencer wanted to know. "Who's Leland Cobb?"

O'Hanna growled. "A headache. A headache wrapped up in a million bucks."

"He sounded alcoholic," Fencer said, "as if he might be in his cups."

"Heh," O'Hanna said. "You're lucky if it's only the cups. Leland Cobb generally winds up down in the cupidors."

Endicott caught up with them at the elevator. "A sad case." He sighed. "Such a burden for his wife. I feel very sorry for Charlotte Cobb."

"Four," O'Hanna told the elevator flunkie. He scowled at the flunkie's uniformed shoulders as the panel cage climbed. "Charlotte is the aspirin in the case. The guy'd get cured a damned sight faster if she wasn't around, sooth-ing the edge of the headache." He led the way along the fourth floor corridor. "If it wasn't for her, somebody'd've slapped Leland down long ago, slapped some sense into him, maybe."

"Fighting drunk?" Fencer asked.

O'HANNA said, "No. He's got bourbon on the funny bone. He pulls gags. Last time he was here, he fished an imitation mouse out of his soup—in front of the whole dining room full of guests."

He pulled up, drummed his knuckles on the door of 402. It opened. The man on the other side of the doorknob swayed as he stared out.

"Good ol' 'Hanna," he articulated thickly. "Johnny-on-a-spot 'Hanna."

Leland Cobb was stewed like an oyster. He was even the bloodless gray color of one. His blurred, watery eyes were nondescript. Hair and eyebrows were mongrel. Life had failed to engrave any lines of character into Leland Cobb's face. Instead, the life he led had puffed the features into bloated vacuity.

"Whew!" muttered good old O'Hanna, fending off an attempted embrace as he entered the room.

"John 'Hanna," Cobb was proclaim-

ing. "Besh frien' a man ever had."

"Baloney. You hate my guts, and always did," O'Hanna said. "What's on your mind, besides the corn juice?"

"Show you."

Cobb started across the room. His gait resembled that of a man riding an imaginary rockinghorse. He bobbed and weaved and wound up clutching the foot of the bed for support. His free hand circled a couple of times, and then pointed down shakily.

"Thash it. Thash there."

O'Hanna, Endicott, and Fred Fencer stared at the red stains on the hotel carpet. The size of pennies, the crimson spots began in the middle of the room and led to the closed clothes closet door.

"Sh' body," Leland Cobb blurted. "Sh' dead body in there."

O'Hanna cried, "Holy hell!" He whipped out a handkerchief, covered the closet door knob carefully before he twisted it open.

Endicott was suffering, aloud. "A body! Oh, my God! This is awful. The publicity—"

Leland Cobb made a sound of "wah-wah-wah." He collapsed on the bed and hid his face in his hands. His shoulders shook.

"What the hell?" Fred Fencer puzzled. The agency dick's eye-glassed glance flashed at Cobb suspiciously. Then he folded his short, stout figure to its knees. He thumbnailled into one red stain, dug up a bit of crimson residue; sniffed, and finally tasted it. "It's a good grade of tomato catsup," he decided.

Endicott's thin frame jerked. His Adam's apple slid into a prolonged rumba. "C-catsup?" he faltered.

"For a fact," Fencer said, grinning. "There ain't any body, O'Hanna. It's just one of the guy's polluted gags."

Leland Cobb rocked on the bed, his face that of a laughing gargoyle. "Joke!" gurgled. "Good joke on Johnny O'Hanna!"

Endicott wasn't amused. He glared at O'Hanna in the closet doorway.

"Mike, you fathead! Do you realize I nearly died of heart failure because you couldn't tell a practical joke from a murder? Thank God, one of us is smart enough to know blood from catsup, anyway."

O'Hanna turned. O'Hanna wasn't amused, either. Not judging by the gleam in his eyes.

"Funny!" he said. "Very funny joke! Now I'll tell one."

He'd quit playing the streamlined, diplomatic house dick. His black Irish temper could climb like mercury under a Yuma sun. It was climbing fast now.

"This will slay you," he said grimly. "There is a body in there—a girl—and she's dead. Dead as a dame can be!"

The announcement chilled them into five-second silence. The stunned pause would have lasted longer than that, if it hadn't been shattered by Leland Cobb's purely alcoholic reaction.

Cobb hiccupped noisily. "Sh' lie!" he accused O'Hanna with a dramatic gesture. "Sh' gashly lie!"

Fred Fencer moved briskly around to the closet doorway. "No, it's a fact!" the agency dick exclaimed. "There is a girl here."

Leland Cobb arose and reeled to the closet. He, too, looked, focusing his eyes with difficulty on the victim.

The low-wattage overhead bulb showed Leland Cobb's clothing racked on hangers along one end of the generous sized closet. A second door opened from the other end, and the girl sprawled on the floor in the middle. She hugged a clenched fist to the red-stained, light bodice of her dress.

Leland Cobb shrank back, his gray lips a grimace of revulsion.

O'Hanna asked, "Did you kill her, Cobb?"

II

COB^B tried hard to deny the accusation with dignity. He looked indignant and solemn. Inhaling a long, sobering breath, he articulated his words with a ponderous carefulness.

"No! I never saw her before! She washn't—wasn't—here a minute ago. I swear—"

A hiccup blasted the foundations out from under his painfully preserved dignity.

He caved into the nearest chair and began to babble incoherently. He'd only tried to play a joke on good ol' O'Hanna, he protested. There wasn't supposed to

be any corpse in the closet.

"You said there was," O'Hanna reminded.

That was the idea. Leland Cobb hiccupped. The corpse he'd been talking about was imaginary, and it was supposed to have disappeared into thin air. He'd thought it would be funny as hell to send good ol' O'Hanna chasing all over San Alpa in search of a non-existent cadaver.

O'Hanna asked, "Then how'd that girl's body get in there?"

Cobb hiccupped violently. "I dunno. Somebody elsh put it there." He squeezed his fingertips into his putty-colored face. "Thash-it. I gesh."

Fred Fencer turned around in the closet doorway and squinted through his glasses. "Let's get this straight," the agency dick said. "The guy claims he committed an imaginary murder with some catsup. And someone else made it real by planting a genuine corpse in this closet here."

"Yeah," O'Hanna said. It was the damnedest grotesquerie of an alibi he'd ever listened to.

"How could it happen?" Fencer wanted to know.

O'Hanna sighed. "It's possible there might not have been a corpse in the closet when he telephoned." He gestured at a doorway on the other side of the bed. "This 402 is a suite of two rooms, with connecting bath and dressing room. Somebody could have hauled the girl's body in through Mrs. Cobb's room and the dressing room, through the door you noticed at the back of the closet—that opens into the dressing room."

"Thin ice," Fencer said.

O'Hanna thought so, too. "Keep an eye on the guy," he told Endicott. "We'll look."

They circled the bed, went through the connecting doorway, into Mrs. Cobb's room. O'Hanna looked at its carpeting, carefully. He examined the tiled floor of the bath, then swung through the dressing room, and on into the closet where the victim lay.

He crouched beside the body. She'd been dead an hour or longer, he thought. There was a tiny circular hole in the fabric of the girl's bodice. She hadn't bled much, and all the blood he could

see was on her dress. The red stain on the closet floor was more catsup.

"Oh-oh," Fencer breathed.

O'Hanna saw it, too. Leland Cobb's shoes were aligned on a slanted shelf along the side of the closet, and in one of the brown brogues was something that wasn't a shoe-tree.

O'Hanna carried that brogue into the bedroom, emptied it out onto the blotter on the desk there.

"Know where this came from?" he asked Leland Cobb.

Cobb peered at the implement — an ice-pick, five inches of wickedly sharp steel thinly filmed with a stain that wasn't catsup.

Cobb hiccupped again, and shook his head.

O'Hanna reached for the ivory-enamedled phone on the desk. "Operator, send Dr. Raymond up to 402. And put through a call for Sheriff Gleeson." He stopped, swallowed, and stared at Cobb's wife.

Charlotte Cobb coming into the suite at this exact moment made a dramatic entrance. But then, she'd probably never walked into a room in her adult life and not made a dramatic entrance. She couldn't help it, with her white-skinned, raven-haired statuesque beauty. She had a complexion like vellum stationery, the eyes and hair drawn in startling, India-ink black.

"What in the world!" She stared at O'Hanna. She knew him, because of the many times Leland Cobb had been in hot water at San Alpa. "What in the world has he done now?"

ENDICOTT was at her side. "Permit me." The assistant manager snared Charlotte Cobb's arm in solicitous fingers and steered her to a chair. "Be a brave little woman," he begged asininely. "Wait—I'll fetch you a glass of water."

He'd practically hauled Charlotte away from her escort by main force. The escort, who'd followed her in, stood near the door, open-mouthed.

O'Hanna knew the guy slightly. He was Ward Tolan, a bond salesman who spent an occasional week-end at San Alpa. Apparently he sold most of his bonds to women, wealthy ones who fell

for his somewhat aggressive good looks. He had just a little bit too much jaw, and it unbalanced his face, gave him a definitely pugnacious appearance.

One glance at that jaw, and any Hollywood casting director would have tabbed Ward Tolan for the villain of the piece.

Tolan scowled. "Say, what is all this?"

"Yes," Charlotte Cobb worried, "what?"

O'Hanna told her. "A playful prank, according to your husband. He says he dunked some catsup around here, trying to kid me that a murder had been committed."

Cobb's wife gasped. "I'm so sorry! It's all my fault!"

Endicott almost fell over with the tumbler he was fetching from the bathroom. "Your fault?" he faltered.

"I'm afraid it is." She was a hell of a beautiful woman when she wanted to look appealing and conscience-stricken, as now. "I'd heard that Mr. O'Hanna was leaving on his vacation. I mentioned it to Leland. I said"—she hesitated—"wouldn't it be too bad if something happened so he couldn't go. If a murder were committed in the hotel, for instance."

O'Hanna wondered at her. On every one of those previous occasions, he'd asked himself the same question: why she didn't simply walk out on Leland Cobb? It couldn't be for lack of other offers, considering her looks and her charm.

It might have been some obscure, thwarted maternal instinct. Anyway, here she was — up to bat for the guy again.

"That's it," she reproached herself. "I gave you the idea, didn't I, darling?"

Cobb peered at her stupidly. And Fencer laughed. "But who gave him the idea of stabbing this poor kid with his ice-pick?"

Leland Cobb reacted as if the agency dick had held a lighted match to his breath. He blew up. He staggered off his chair, making for Fred Fencer in sudden, howling rage. "Why, you dirty—"

"Give me that." Charlotte Cobb snatched the tumbler from the surprised Endicott, and sloshed its contents

full into her drunken spouse's distorted face. "You keep still, darling! I'll see you through this. I always have, haven't I?"

Leland Cobb subsided into O'Hanna's arms. It must have been the reaction. His alcohol-punished heart couldn't take it. He crumpled in a dead-weight, flaccid torpor.

Cobb's wife turned to Fencer. She was an aroused Amazon, feverish with defensive energy.

"Now!" she said determinedly. "What did you mean by that remark about a poor kid and—and an ice-pick?"

"Come over here and see for yourself." The agency dick shrugged.

Charlotte Cobb stopped abruptly in front of the closet. She didn't faint or scream or even shudder. She took it like a thoroughbred, with only the tiniest perceptible tightening in her manner. Her voice was lower, but perfectly under control.

"You intend to charge Leland with this murder?" she asked.

"Murder?" Ward Tolan echoed.

He strode across the room, took a look into the closet, too. He damned near folded to the floor. His knees sagged, and he saved himself by clutching the open door for support. That oversized jaw worked, bunching muscles the size of marbles in his cheeks.

Fred Fencer pounced like a hawk. "You know her, don't you?"

"Yes," the bond salesman admitted. He shot a quick look at Charlotte Cobb. The back of his hand came up and rubbed his chin. "She's Kitty Beale, a schoolteacher from the Middle West. This is a hell of a shock. I was talking to her in the lobby downstairs, only a couple of hours ago."

FENCER wasn't convinced. "A schoolteacher?"

"That's right," Ward Tolan said. "It's a rural school, and they close it for two weeks in the fall. Corn-picking vacation, she called it. It seems the jaspers keep their kids home to help get in the crop, so school can't keep, anyway."

"Go on," Fencer said.

"Well, she is—was—young, pretty, high-spirited. She'd got fed up with

ABC's and Saturday night swims in a wash tub. Like a lot of those cow-pasture queens, she had delusions of glamour. She wasn't content to graduate from teaching school to being some clod-hopper's wife, not without having her fling first.

"She knew there were fast trains that made it to and from California in four days each way, and that'd leave her almost a week in San Alpa," Tolan shrugged. "She'd been reading the travel folders. She thought her twenty bucks a day would entitle her to have breakfast right across the table from Gary Cooper, I guess. Then she'd go dunk herself in the same pool with the Junior League, and probably wind up the evening by dancing with Ceser Romero. She'd been sitting around the lobby all day, waiting for somebody to give her a tumble."

Cynicism spread across Fencer's face. "And you did."

Tolan was equally cynical. "What the hell? I peddle bonds for a living. Anybody who can afford the rates here is a pretty fair prospect. I thought she was a prospect, so naturally I went over and asked if we hadn't met in Miami last winter."

O'Hanna asked, "She told you this story and so you bowed out?"

"Yeah. I had a cocktail party date for four-thirty, in the Palomar Room. I'd invited about a dozen guests, the Cobbs included."

"Both of them?"

"I invited both," Tolan nodded. "But when Charlotte came in she apologized for Leland, said he wasn't feeling well, and had decided to stay in his room."

Fencer grinned. "Maybe it was something the guy drank, huh?"

"No." The bond salesman hesitated, stroked the outline of his jaw with thoughtful fingers. He looked worriedly at Charlotte Cobb. "I'm sorry as hell, but this is murder. I've got to tell them the truth."

She stared.

Tolan said, "It was about four o'clock when I talked to Kitty Beale. Half an hour later, when I crossed the lobby on my way to the Palomar Room, I saw her again. Cobb was there, trying to pick her up. As I walked by, I over-

heard him invite her upstairs for a little private, cozy drinkie...."

The San Alpa was an hour's drive, over the steeply winding mountain road, from the county seat, so there was a long wait before Sheriff Ed Gleeson arrived. But Dr. Raymond, the house physician, took a look and said the murder had happened around five o'clock, give or take ten minutes. He was busy in the other half of the suite now, trying to sober up Leland Cobb. Doc Raymond wasn't too hopeful, but he thought maybe a stomach pump and cold towels

"Maybe he didn't do it," O'Hanna said. That got them.

"Well," O'Hanna asked, "if he did, why did he? What's his motive for killing this girl, this schoolteacher he'd never even laid eyes on before?"

III

W

WORRY seamed Endicott's thin face. He didn't approve of crime at San Alpa. But if these things had to happen, the management wanted them cleaned up in a hurry—silently, without

PLAYING FOOTsie WITH TROUBLE



IF A MURDER WERE COMMITTED around a swimming pool, a soleprint might be the important clue—rather than a fingerprint.

Naturally, soleprints do not occur as frequently as do fingerprints, but when they do, they are as positive as the latter. An unusual case in point is that of two French murderers who removed their shoes and socks in order to avoid staining them with the blood of their victim, but who left their soleprints at the scene of the crime!

The most extensive use of soleprints has been in the identification of suspects caught in minor infractions of the law. For instance, Joseph Sturm was sentenced to New York's Welfare Island to serve ninety days for vagrancy. Since both his arms had been amputated sometime previously, it was found necessary to soleprint him. Several months later, a Joe Somers, also armless, was sentenced on a similar charge to New York City's Workhouse on Rikers Island. In this case, too, the police soleprinted the vagrant. On comparison, the two soleprint cards showed both prisoners to be one.

Because the ridges, loops and whorls on the tips of the fingers are more extensively classified than those on the soles of the feet, they are of more convenience and importance in criminology. However, the FBI has developed a system of classification for soleprints, and it maintains a special identification file for those who have lost their fingers.

The same equipment is used for taking soleprints as is used for taking fingerprints, but only the ball of the foot and the big toe are printed. It is only on them that the necessary patterns are complete enough to permit classification.

—Norman Renard

would have the suspect in shape to talk by the time the sheriff arrived.

O'Hanna and Fencer and Endicott were taking a minute to talk over matters.

"You know," O'Hanna said, "I think maybe Charlotte's got something on the ball."

Endicott stared. "You mean she might get him off?"

annoyance to the paying guests.

It was O'Hanna's job to keep these things quiet. So the sheriff could just call at the back door and be handed this case, all neatly solved.

The suggestion that maybe this case wasn't solved distressed Endicott.

But not Fred Fencer. "Ah, the guy's a dipsy," the agency dick said, "and dipsos don't need motives. All they

need is a good, ugly, homicidal impulse."

Endicott looked immensely cheered. Fencer watched the assistant manager, and took his cue from Endicott's expression, apparently.

"There's no argument," he declared flatly. He removed his glasses and breathed on them leisurely, managing to look cocksure as hell. "The girl was alive at four-thirty when he invited her upstairs. Half an hour later, she was dead in his clothes closet. He's the only one who could have done the deed."

Assistant Manager Endicott nodded. It needed no crystal ball to read his thoughts, either. He felt sorry for Charlotte Cobb, of course. But after all, Cobb was a rotter who drank and caroused and disgraced the upper classes. The best people didn't approve of Leland Cobb and wouldn't resent his being locked up. So the publicity couldn't hurt the hotel, particularly.

Fencer polished the spectacles with his handkerchief. "The rest is easy. He'd killed her, but how was he going to get rid of the body? And even if he carried the body out, or threw it from the window at night, he was probably worried about bloodstains on his carpet. Well, he got the drunken idea of calling Room Service for some catsup. He thought he could make a gag of the whole thing, and pretend to be surprised as hell when we found a genuine corpse there. But the big thing, he could sprinkle the catsup around and cover up the bloodstains on his carpet."

O'Hanna said stubbornly, "Maybe." Fencer laughed. "Forget that motive angle. The girl was a schoolma'am, and pretty strait-laced. Cobb made a pass at her, she cold-shouldered him, and he got sore. Why, I've seen drunks pick a fight just because someone refused to have a drink with them. Or because they didn't like another guy's looks."

He hooked his glasses onto his ears, and gave O'Hanna a patronizing glance.

"It happens all the time," he said. "Half the murders in this country are committed by drunks acting on impulse. They grab a gun or a knife and let the victim have it."

O'Hanna spread his muscular, tanned hands and said, "But he grabbed an ice-pick."

"So what?"

"So he had an ice-pick," O'Hanna said.

Fencer didn't follow the logic. "I still say so what?"

O'Hanna shrugged. "People don't generally carry them in their pants pockets. Room Service doesn't supply ice-picks with orders of tomato catsup. Are you trying to tell me that Cobb knew in advance he was going to have a homicidal impulse, so he brought an ice-pick with him?"

That stopped Fencer. "Well-l," he hesitated.

"It shows premeditation," O'Hanna said. "And how could Cobb premeditate the murder of a girl he'd never even met yet?"

"It's a detail," Fencer admitted, without enthusiasm.

"Sure, Mike. It's just a detail." Endicott moistened his lips, ran a hand over his thinning hair. "Don't worry about it. Fencer will have all those little angles cleared up when you get back, two weeks from now."

O'Hanna's Irish-blue eyes whetted down to blued steel slits. "When I—Huh?"

The assistant manager said, "We won't let it spoil your vacation. You've been overworked lately, Mike. You need a rest, a change of scenery."

"A brush-off is a brush-off," O'Hanna said dangerously, "in any kind of language."

COLOR climbed in Endicott's thin face. He warned, "Now, Mike! You're not going to turn this perfectly simple murder into a mystery. Good Lord, you know what Gleeson will do, if anybody gets him to thinking about this ice-pick angle." He perspired. "Why, that dumb county sheriff would come down on San Alpa's neck with both feet. He'd turn the hotel inside out. Our paying guests' personal affairs wouldn't be safe from his third-degree methods. We might just as well try to run a resort inside a police station!"

O'Hanna said there were worse places than police stations. "Morgues, for instance."

"There won't be any more trouble unless you make it," Endicott asserted.

"We've got the guilty party—Fencer has proved that to my satisfaction. And I must say I consider he made a darned good job of it, too."

Fencer looked pleased, pushed out his lower lip modestly, and disclaimed, "Oh, it was nothing."

O'Hanna ignored the agency dick. "Meaning you don't like my methods?" he asked Endicott.

The assistant manager smiled thinly. "I didn't say that—yet." He paused, let the last word sink in. "But, after all, Fencer's been on duty since six o'clock, and he's responsible to the management. You're not, Mike. So if you insist on interfering, if you make a mess of things, I'll have to explain to the owners that it wasn't his fault. A word to the wise, Mike."

O'Hanna's Irish-blue stare peered straight down into Endicott's single-track mind. "You'd be in favor of firing me and hiring him." He got up and strode to the door. "Thanks for the advice," he said. "Now I'll tell you exactly what you can do with the job," and he did.

Endicott's face took fire. "You don't have to be vulgar!"

"I didn't have to," O'Hanna said, "but it was a pleasure."

He slammed the door. He was sore as hell. It wasn't the job, altogether, although O'Hanna liked the job well enough. He'd called San Alpa a chromium-fitted bird cage, true, but he happened to regard it as his own personal bird cage, and he'd grown used to carrying its master pass-key around in his pocket.

What he didn't like was Endicott's attitude. Or Fencer's. In fact, he didn't like Fencer.

He decided Fencer was a so-and-so. "I only stayed around as a favor to the guy, and here he's trying to show me up, trying to muscle me off the pay-roll! The nerve of the son!" It made O'Hanna's black Irish temper boil.

Steaming over the injustice, he descended to the lobby desk and inquired about Kitty Beale. She had registered as Miss Catherine Beale of Indian Prairie, Iowa, and she had been assigned Room 637.

O'Hanna said, "Well, try long-dis-

tance—get hold of her family or her friends." He added over his shoulder, going away, "If you get them, I'll take the call in her room."

O'Hanna didn't push around easily. "We'll see," he brooded, "who's the house dick around here."

He still had the pass-key, anyway. Using it, he entered Room 637.

"Hell on wheels!" he choked.

It was as if a panzer division had laid down a perfume barrage, and then played blitz games in here. The cloying reek of perfume came from an overturned bottle, saturating a confusion of spilled silk scanties and similar intimate lingerie. Bureau drawers had been jerked out and overturned. That for a beginning. The vandal had shucked the pillows out of their cases, slashed the ticking, and scattered goose feathers and down over the scene. The mattress, in shreds, showed its coil-sprung anatomy.

O'Hanna hurried to open a window. That started a young blizzard of feathers blowing, scudding about his ankles as he crossed to the far side of the room. Something about one of the overturned bureau drawers caught his eye. Two white daubs that looked like thin paint from a distance, but clearly weren't he saw as he drew closer. He stabbed a finger at one of them, testing the fresh, gummy touch of the white substance.

"Adhesive," he murmured. He wondered what Kitty Beale could have kept taped to the underside of this drawer.

THE creak of tip-toeing shoe leather cut through his puzzlement. O'Hanna whirled—a man was emerging from Kitty Beale's bathroom. A hell of a big man, pointing a gun that looked big enough to mount on a battleship.

O'Hanna dived, crashing into bone-and-muscle so solid it didn't yield an inch, yet managing to snare the gun and twist it floorward. They locked, strained, struggled over the weapon. The big man's blue-complexioned face turned purple with effort, but he went to the wall, backed against it by O'Hanna's sinewy strength. Wrestling there, he must have rubbed up against the wall switch.

For the lights clicked out. Like that.

In the darkness he tried butting O'Hanna, then brought up a knee that felt like a sledge-hammer. O'Hanna doubled up, which was a feint on his part, and lashed his right with all its power at the big man's middle. It was a swell idea but it didn't work—didn't work at all. The right never landed. What did land was a wallop out of nowhere that almost blasted O'Hanna's head off his shoulders, knocked him cold.

But in a minute or so O'Hanna rolled on the floor, sat up, and spat out a feather as a voice asked cheerfully, too cheerfully: "Well, well, well! What happened to you?" The cheerful voice, the smile, and the flashing eye-glasses belonged to Fred Fencer.

"Where'd you come from?" O'Hanna mumbled.

Fencer said he'd thought he'd better check up on the Beale girl a bit. "I opened the door and turned on the lights and there you were."

"You didn't meet a guy barging out of here?"

"Nope."

"Then he got away!"

IV

THE agency op wasn't sympathetic. He scrutinized the vicious bruise that began on O'Hanna's cheek-bone and angled up into his haircut. "What are you, anyway? A house dick or the tin duck in a shooting gallery?"

O'Hanna hated him. He didn't say much, for just then the phone rang. "Never mind, I'll take it."

Fencer shrugged, and brushed at the goose down adhering to his conservative business suit. "I shouldn't have said a tin duck. They don't grow feathers." He stepped over and hauled down the window sash.

"Hello?" O'Hanna was saying.

The operator told him, "We called Indian Prairie. Miss Beale hasn't any friends or family there. It's one of those things—the Indian Prairie Central says no one there even knows anybody named Kitty Beale."

"Bad news?" Fencer questioned.

O'Hanna said, "So-so." He walked to the door. "Oh, hell, I won't hold out on you. If we're both running for

the office of house dick here, I'm willing to start from scratch with you."

"Well?"

"Kitty Beale isn't a schoolteacher from the Corn Belt," O'Hanna said. "Now we can go on from there, and may the best man win."

Fencer looked genuinely grateful. "That's white of you. Maybe sometime I can give you a break. I hope so."

O'Hanna nodded, opened the door, and came to a dead stop. His Irish-blue eyes explored the sixth floor corridor, in both directions, incredulously.

"Anything wrong?" Fencer's tone was friendly, now.

"No." O'Hanna marveled that his voice sounded friendly, too. "Not a thing."

There wasn't, either—visibly. The corridor looked as fresh and tidy as the day it had originally been painted and carpeted.

"Well," the agency dick said, "good luck to you, old chap."

"Same to you," O'Hanna said. He stepped out, pulled the door shut and glared at it. "Rat! he remarked under his breath. "Louse!"

He was probably taking a damned fool chance, O'Hanna told himself. He hurried back to the Cobb suite anyway.

Doc Raymond, with shirt sleeves rolled to his elbows, sat beside the patient who was in bed in his bedroom.

"How is he?" O'Hanna asked.

Raymond turned both thumbs down. "With his heart, he's lucky to be alive. Another six months on his brand of liquid diet, and he'll be a dead man. In his condition, he might just as well drink embalming fluid in the first place—cheaper and quicker."

Cobb's voice issued through the towels which swathed his face. "Nuts, Doc. Higher-priced specialists than you gave me that song-and-dance years ago. I can kill a quart a day and still outlive all of you sour-pussed sawbones."

Doc Raymond shrugged, walked across the room, and straightened a picture on the wall. "Your mistake. The quart a day is killing you."

O'Hanna peeled layers of towels, cold ones, off the patient's putty-colored features. "What about the girl?" he demanded.

"I can't remember," Cobb said vaguely. "That's always the way after a binge. I can't ever remember what I did. Was there a girl?"

"You picked her up in the lobby," O'Hanna said.

"That wasn't any girl—that was my wife," Cobb said. "It's the last thing I do remember."

"Ice-pick," O'Hanna suggested hopefully.

"It's no use. It's gone from me. Absolutely gone."

"Catsup?" O'Hanna asked.

Leland Cobb shook his head and groaned. "That damned stomach pump sucked everything outa me, even the marrow in my bones. Why don't you slip the girl ten bucks and get rid of her?"

"She isn't interested in ten dollars."

"Okay, slip her twenty. Fifty. Anything so I can rest."

O'Hanna gestured Doc Raymond into the other room. "Is that guy kidding me?"

"It's hard to say. I'm a practicing M.D., not a psychiatrist specializing in dipsomania." The physician eyed O'Hanna with professional concern. "I'd be more at home working on that face of yours."

"It doesn't hurt any more than a mule-kick," O'Hanna said.

HE snapped on the closet light, knelt beside the dead girl, and attempted gently to open her clenched right hand. Not all the way. He'd seen enough when he found the trace of white adhesive gum on the index finger.

He straightened, smiling. "It doesn't hurt at all now."

Doc Raymond said this was a marvelous cure. "I'll write it up for the *Journal of American Medicine*. Prescription for a black eye—hold hands with a corpse."

O'Hanna was amazed. "Is my eye black?"

"It's hardly noticeable," Raymond said reassuringly, "the way the whole side of your head is puffing out." He became serious. "Did you notice her hair, Mike?"

"Yeah. Blonde."

"I looked a little closer than that,"

the physician said. "I wanted to make sure there wasn't a head injury, indicating she'd been slugged before she was stabbed. There's a well-defined streak of road dust in that blonde hair."

O'Hanna stared.

"Cobb's suitcases at the back of the closet are dusty. From being packed in the rumble of his car, I'd imagine."

O'Hanna applauded. "I'll be damned. If Endicott really wants to hire a new house dick, you're the guy for the job."

The physician said, "No. Any M.D. would have looked for a scalp injury under the circumstances. I'm a stickler for details, so I looked around and noticed the suitcases, too."

O'Hanna wasn't listening. "Where's the guy's wife?"

"In the suite next door. She sent word I was to telephone her in case of any change in Cobb's condition."

"Sent word?"

"By Endicott," Doc Raymond said. He adjusted the hang of a bridge lamp shade. "Endicott came in to fetch a dress from the closet in her room."

"Hunh."

"Women like to keep up appearances at such a time as this," Doc Raymond volunteered. . . .

Ward Tolan opened the door of the suite next door to the Cobb rooms. There were half a dozen couples in the living room, the men in tuxedoes and the women in attractively low-cut dinner gowns.

O'Hanna said, "You're here—good. I want to ask a few questions about that cocktail party you told us about."

"Go right ahead." Tolan's jaw had a hostile set. "Those are the people. Charlotte had invited us all to dinner. Of course, that's off now."

"I don't see why." Charlotte Cobb advanced defiantly. Her silver-cloth gown was a knock-out. She held her chin high. "As soon as the sheriff arrives, all this mystery will be cleared up instantly."

"You sound sure of it," O'Hanna said.

"I am."

"Why?"

"It's very simple," Charlotte Cobb said. "I've learned that girl was killed at five o'clock, within ten minutes either way."

"You learned that—how?"

"I told her." Assistant Manager Endicott came out of another room of the suite, steering his thin length through the tuxedoes. He glared at O'Hanna truculently. "Mike, this is disgraceful! Disgraceful! An employee of San Alpa running around with a shiner!"

O'Hanna sighed. "Go on, Mrs. Cobb."

Her breasts lifted. "Leland has an alibi. He couldn't have been with that girl. I was with him myself, at that time."

"I understood," O'Hanna pointed out, "the cocktail party started at four-thirty."

Charlotte Cobb nodded brightly. "It did, but I waited for Leland for twenty minutes. In our suite, where he's supposed to have been murdering this girl. Then, on my way to the Palomar Room, I found him in the lobby. He was—well, he was ill." She made her voice determined. "That delayed me more, getting him upstairs. You can ask the elevator operator. He helped me get Leland into the suite. It must have been nearly five then. I stayed quite a while longer. We had—well, an argument. I reminded Leland that we'd invited these people to dinner. I begged him to get some sleep, and then take a cold shower."

SHE looked around. Her jet eyes blazed from face to face. "Isn't that true, all of you? I came late to the party—didn't I arrive about a quarter past five?"

"You were late," Ward Tolan acknowledged, "but not that late."

Charlotte Cobb gave him a stormy, long-lashed look. "How do you know, Ward? You weren't even there when I arrived."

O'Hanna spun around to the large-jawed bond salesman. "What the hell, guy?"

Tolan sulked. "The only table reservation I could get was on the mezzanine. We were trooping up and downstairs all the time between drinks, to the dance floor. But I'm sure Charlotte came in by five o'clock, or even earlier. Even though I probably was dancing with another lady at the exact moment."

"Which lady?"

"I wouldn't remember. I danced with all of them."

O'Hanna asked, "Are you sure it was a lady? And not your big, blue-jawed friend you were waltzing around with?"

That jaw of Tolan's dropped like a trap-door. He gaped at O'Hanna in abrupt, doom-shadowed fright. "That sounds like Rocky Squale!" he choked. "But Rocky isn't here!"

In Tolan's distress, he wasn't aware that the door had opened.

"Oh, yes, he is. Take a look."

There stood Fred Fencer, beaming. He wasn't alone. He had the big, blue-jawed man in tow.

Tolan quavered. "Rocky. Oh, my God!"

"Yeah," the agency dick sparkled. "The guy that socked you, O'Hanna. I caught him. It was simple." In high good humor, he slapped O'Hanna's shoulder. "I'm surprised you didn't see through it. You'd been knocked out only a few seconds, judging by the way you acted. I hadn't seen anybody getting away when I came down the hall, so it was a cinch this guy was still there. He'd heard me coming, and dived back into the bathroom."

O'Hanna had taken the chance deliberately, he reminded himself. He'd held pretty good cards in Room 637—a pair, in fact. And he'd thrown them in, tried to fill an inside straight instead. But he was damned if he was going to stand here and let Fencer play those pasteboards.

"Simple." The agency dick grinned. "I merely opened and closed the door, as if I'd left, too. Rocky barged out unsuspecting—and there I was, with a gun and the drop on him."

The black Irish boiled in O'Hanna.

"You dirty doublecrossing son of scum!" He reached, plucked the spectacles off Fencer's nose. His fist followed, crackingly. He socked Fencer, right in the eye.

V

ASSISTANT MANAGER ENDICOTT fluttered like a nesting hen over the fallen Fencer. It was unthinkable—a San Alpa employee swinging on an-

other employee—and doing it in front of a roomful of surtax society.

"Mike!" he squawked. "Have you gone crazy?"

O'Hanna rubbed his knuckles pleasantly. "Wait and hear my side of it! I wasn't the first one who interrupted Rocky Squale in 637 tonight. Fencer got there ahead of me. Rocky jumped into the bathroom when he heard him at the door. Then I came along, and Fencer ducked into the clothes-closet. When Rocky and I tangled, it was Fencer who turned out the lights and buffaloed me with a gun."

The agency dick sat up, nursing his eye. "You *are* crazy, guy."

O'Hanna denied it. "If you'd come in from the hallway—the window was open—half the feathers would have blown outside. There wasn't one pin-feather in the corridor. That proves you were in the room all the time, doesn't it?"

Aghast, Endicott puzzled lamely, "But did he—"

"That seventy-five-cent grapefruit went to his head," O'Hanna said. "He wanted the credit for capturing Rocky. He figured a few simple solutions like that one would slip him inside my shoes here."

"And you let him—"

"For the time being. Rocky hadn't found anything or he wouldn't have stayed there playing pillow games until he got caught at it." O'Hanna shrugged. "I was after the killer, not the also-rans."

"Thanks," Rocky said gloomily. "Thanks for the compliments. At that, I guess you throw the weight around here."

O'Hanna suggested, "If you've got a load on your mind—"

"Well"—the blue-complexioned man hesitated—"he said if I'd play ball with him there wouldn't be any rap for destroying hotel property."

O'Hanna said he was more interested in why Rocky had destroyed it.

"I was hunting for evidence that might be worth five or ten grand," Rocky said. "You don't know who Kitty Beale was, I bet?"

"Don't let me stop you," said O'Hanna.

Rocky grinned. "She was Mrs. Ward Tolan. Hell, they've been in the racket for years. Tolan peddles bonds for a front, is all. His real business is making plays for rich married dames. When he hooks one, Kitty steps in and threatens to sue for a divorce. She's got snapshots, letters, the works. She wants five or ten grand for a quiet settlement, else she'll sue for alienation of affections. The dames are scared of the husband, so Kitty collects—or she used to."

O'Hanna's Irish-blue glance roved. "Where's Tolan?"

"Gone!" Endicott gasped.

"If you'd given me back my glasses," Fred Fencer expostulated, "this wouldn't have happened. I'd have watched him. I could have told you he committed that murder."

O'Hanna thrust the glasses at him. "Come on!" They ran into the hall. "Stairs," O'Hanna said, heading toward them. "How did you figure, Fencer?"

"It's cold, boy, cold. Tolan's in love with Charlotte Cobb. His wife stood in the way. He doped out how he could get rid of Kitty, pin the job on Cobb, and marry a million bucks."

"They don't act like any two people in love I ever saw."

"They're trying hard not to."

O'Hanna took two steps at a time. "It's a theory."

"Fact," Fencer said. He was running out of breath. "Kitty thought—same old shakedown. Rocky, too! He was watching—his chance—steal the snapshot and love letters. Rocky saw—Palomar Room—how it worked."

"How did it?"

"Five o'clock. Tolan—took powder—said a phone call. He beat it—elevator. Back in five minutes."

"Take a deep breath," O'Hanna urged.

"He'd stolen—Charlotte's room key. Met Kitty there. Cobb—next room—too drunk to know."

"But Charlotte says she was still there."

"Lie. Lie for anybody she loves, she would."

They rounded into the sixth-floor corridor. "Is this the lowdown," O'Hanna asked, "or are you—"

"It's on the level."

O'Hanna asked, "On the level, how do you explain the catsup gag?"

"On the level, I don't know."

O'Hanna swung into the doorway of Room 637. It was already open.

He exploded, "Holy hell! Look at it!"

THREE was a hell of a lot of blood this time. Ward Tolan lay folded over the upset bureau drawers. He'd been stabbed in the back while he'd been bending and fumbling there.

O'Hanna grasped Fred Fencer's lapels. "Damn you, if you've been two-timing me again!"

Fencer shrank. "It's a fact. Charlotte Cobb was even in our agency. She was arranging to shadow Cobb, divorce him, mental cruelty—"

"Then you knew it all the time!"

The agency dick swallowed, suddenly nauseated by the whole thing. He gulped, "So I stink. Well, put yourself in my shoes. I'm up against this stuff every day, all day—divorce racket. And for what? Ten bucks a day. I thought I could louse the deal up once and for all, and get a decent, permanent job."

"Keep everybody out of here," O'Hanna growled. He whirled, ran for the stairs again.

Doc Raymond met him at the door of Suite 400. "What is it, Mike? Operator said you wanted me in your office, but you weren't there, so I came up here."

O'Hanna swore and ran past the physician, swerving into Cobb's bedroom. "Holy some-more!"

Charlotte Cobb swayed in the connecting doorway. Crimson rilled from the forearm she held close, seeping down over the silver-cloth gown.

"What is this?" she asked. "A hotel or a madhouse? I saw a man sneaking in here. He meant to kill Leland, I think. I fought him off—he had a knife—"

O'Hanna said, "It's only a scratch."

He stared into the living room, past her. A picture frame caught his eye. It hung twenty degrees off the horizontal, and only minutes ago, he'd seen Doc Raymond straighten it.

"Excuse," O'Hanna said.

He wrenched the picture off the wall, dug his fingernails in, tore off the card-

board backing. There was still enough adhesive on the legal-looking paper then so that it stuck to the cardboard. O'Hanna peered at the Spanish phrases, unable to read Spanish, but making sense out of the Tijuana dateline that was three years old, and more sense out of the names—Catherine Beale, Leland Cobb.

"You fell for this?" he asked.

Charlotte Cobb came at him in cat-like silence with a surgical scalpel from Doc Raymond's instrument bag.

"Naughty," O'Hanna said.

She kept coming. He had to hit Charlotte Cobb on her aristocratic chin....

Sheriff Gleeson said, "I had a blow-out. Changed a tire on the way." He peered around Endicott's office. "Why, where's O'Hanna? You haven't fired the guy, have you?"

Endicott was embarrassed. "Nonsense. We couldn't get along without Mike. I've always said so."

Doc Raymond chuckled. "It's all in order for you, Sheriff. Blood group tests will undoubtedly demonstrate that some of the stains on Mrs. Cobb's dress are Tolan's blood. You could get a conviction on that alone."

The desk phone purred as he spoke. Endicott took the instrument, said, "For you, Gleeson."

"Yeah—hello," the sheriff bassoed.

O'Hanna's voice was mixed up with strains of juke-box. "Don't let anyone kid you about Charlotte Cobb," that voice said. "They streamline ice-boxes nowadays, remember. She's the type that never fell for a man in her life. She had a million reasons for marrying Cobb—all of 'em printed by the Government. Besides, she had it on good medical authority the guy wouldn't last six months. The reason she kept going to bat for him was in the hope he'd drop dead during one of his God-awful binges. She stuck it out for two and a half years before she decided to settle for a divorce and a fat settlement."

Gleeson gulped. "Just what the—"

"Don't interrupt," O'Hanna's voice said. "This is costing me money. Say yeah, if you've got it so far."

"Yeah."

O'Hanna's voice resumed. "Tolan's usual racket wouldn't work, because

Charlotte wasn't the type. So he changed the routine. Kitty followed the Cobbs to San Alpa, registered herself as a schoolma'am from Iowa, and pulled something new in the shakedown line. She told Charlotte she'd vacationed in California three years ago. She said she'd gone to Tijuana on a sightseeing jaunt, had met a guy there at the races, and their evening had turned into an all-out bender. When she woke up in the morning, she was married to a total stranger. Ashamed of the mess, she'd sneaked across the Border alone and tried to forget. It wasn't until just now she'd found out she was married to a millionaire named Leland Cobb."

"Wait!" Gleeson said. "Are them things legal?"

"Mexican divorces aren't always," O'Hanna's voice said, "but marriage is matrimony anywhere. You can see where it left Charlotte, if true. She wasn't even legally married to the guy, let alone entitled to a divorce and a settlement. She was over a barrel where Kitty could demand any kind of a price. Yeah, so far?"

"Yeah. So far."

"She arranged to meet Kitty in her suite at a quarter to five. Kitty had a forged, phony Tijuana certificate taped to the underside of a bureau drawer. She took it with her. Charlotte went to the closet, supposedly to get the money, whirled, and used the ice-pick she had hidden there. She pushed Kitty's body deep back behind the suitcases in the closet, then she hid the certificate inside a picture frame in her own room."

"Why didn't she destroy it?"

O'HANNA said: "She thought she was framing Cobb. She could blackmail him out of a hell of a big divorce settlement by waving that paper under his nose. People would think Kitty had been shaking him down, and that'd be his motive for murder."

"Yeah."

"About ten of five, she got Cobb out of the lobby. She made the frame-up more binding with that catsup gag. It isn't hard to sell a drunk an idea and make him think it's his own."

Gleeson said, "That happens to plenty of sober guys. But what was her alibi?"

"A damned smooth one. She told the truth about her time table, and made everyone believe she was lying to protect her hubby." O'Hanna laughed grimly. "She must have ducked out of the cocktail party a few minutes before six. Wanted to powder her nose, you know. Actually, she had to slip upstairs and make sure Cobb went through with his gag. He'd just got his Dutch courage up to sprinkling the catsup around. That's when she moved the body from the back of the closet. Since she entered through her own room Cobb didn't even see her. She hurried downstairs, then came up in the elevator with Tolan."

"Yeah. Yeah."

O'Hanna's voice wound up, "It blew up in her face the minute Fencer hauled Rocky in, and started talking about 637. I socked Fencer, and Tolan took a powder. Charlotte was smart enough to see then that Tolan and Kitty were in it together. Tolan had left the cocktail party for five minutes, gone up to Kitty's room, to find out whether Kitty had collected the shakedown cash. He'd have to come clean to beat the murder rap himself, and that would involve Charlotte."

"Why?"

"Easy. He knew Kitty was blackmailing her, not Cobb at all. She had to silence Tolan, but fast. She dived into the living room, grabbed the phone, and talked to Doc Raymond. Posing as the operator, she told Doc I wanted him downstairs in my office. She ran back, grabbed a scalpel from his instrument bag, and followed Tolan to 637. He was making sure about that certificate, you see. Tolan made a pretty bloody job, and she got stains on her dress. That's why she scratched her arm and made up a yarn about a mystery man trying to knife Cobb. What she really went back to the Cobb suite for, though, was to get rid of the Tijuana certificate, knowing by then it was forged."

Gleeson said, "Yeah." He said, "But, Mike, where in hell are you, and what other angle are you working on?"

"I'm not," O'Hanna's voice denied. "I'm down the road a ways, grabbing myself some vacation. Before some other damned thing happens." • • •

He Married a MADAM

A True Story by HAROLD HELFER

ONCE upon a time there was a murderer who had his cake and ate it, too—for a while. He probably came as close as any killer to pulling the perfect crime.

Dr. Robert W. Buchanan was a young, mild-mannered physician who came to New York from Nova Scotia to practice medicine. He seemed to do fairly well but somehow or other wasn't quite satisfied. Sometimes he would talk about getting rich real quick in the wonderful land of the United States, then returning to Nova Scotia and living like a lord. But of course, we all have our little day-dreams.

One thing, though. Even when the young doctor was in a sighing mood, he seemed to dote on his pretty wife.

Then one day, early in 1890, a sad-faced Dr. Buchanan showed up in court and said that his wife had deserted him. There was another man, and she had gone off with him. Dr. Buchanan charged her with adultery and was granted a divorce.

Several months later Dr. Buchanan engaged a "housekeeper." She was Mrs. Annie B. Sutherland, a middle-aged widow from Newark. There were, however, a few close acquaintances of the physician who knew that the doctor had actually married the woman. They couldn't understand why he was so bent on keeping it secret.

It was true, of course, that the new Mrs. Buchanan was in her fifties and considerably older than the thirty-year-old physician. But then, there had been May-December marriages before. Besides, the former Mrs. Sutherland, the doctor had confided, was the daughter of a banker and a woman of unusually fine and esthetic tastes.

Eventually—some had the impression that it was because of the former widow's insistence—the doctor and his new wife did away with the "housekeeper" fiction and acknowledged that they were

man and wife. It cannot be said, however, that the doctor was particularly happy about appearing with her in public.

Suddenly, the second Mrs. Buchanan, poor soul, fell ill. Although Dr. Buchanan called in several other doctors, none of them were able to do anything for her. She passed away, and the consulting physicians agreed that she had died of a cerebral hemorrhage.

The widower, having been willed some \$40,000 by the second Mrs. Buchanan, returned to Nova Scotia a rich man, exactly as he had dreamed of doing.

Here the story would have ended, except that one day a wizened old fellow, who called himself James M. Smith, dropped in on the old New York *World*. He said he believed that Dr. Buchanan had poisoned his second wife. The newspaper, as a matter of routine, assigned a reporter to listen to Smith's story.

The caller repeated his charges that Dr. Buchanan had made away with his wife. The reporter asked why he thought so.

"I'll tell you why," said the wizened man. "Annie Sutherland was no more a banker's daughter than I am. She ran a string of bawdy houses. That's where she got all her money. And that's why this doctor didn't care to be seen with her publicly after they were married. He was afraid she'd be recognized as a madam and he thought he was too good to associate with anybody like that."

The reporter's ears perked up some at the disclosure of the real calling of Mrs. Buchanan No. Two. But when Mr. Smith acknowledged that he'd been Annie Sutherland's boy-friend, the reporter pointed out, "So your feeling that Dr. Buchanan poisoned her is based on a certain amount of prejudice. After all, there's no law that says a man can't marry a madam if he wants to. Which is all there seems to be against Dr. Buchanan."



"She ran a string of bawdy houses. That's where she got her money."

"There's one more thing," said Smith. "He started fooling around with Annie Sutherland while his first wife was still around."

Well, of course, that did give things a new twist. At least, it was enough to send the *World* reporter to call on the doctors who had treated Mrs. Buchanan No. Two in her last hours. Each stated that she had not been poisoned, and each declared himself willing to stake his professional reputation on his opinion. They declared that if she had been poisoned, her eyes would have given that fact away. But they'd been perfectly normal; there'd been no contraction at all.

Nevertheless, the sudden disappearance of Mrs. Buchanan No. One and the sudden death of Mrs. Buchanan No. Two, plus the doctor's haughty attitude toward his second wife, whom he was supposed to have loved, decided the *World* reporter to go to Nova Scotia. Had he found the doctor there by him-

self, the chances are that only a routine interview would have resulted, and that would have ended the matter.

But the doctor wasn't by himself. He was living with a very pretty woman—wife No. One!

So the whole thing shaped up as a diabolical plot, whereby the mild-appearing doctor could have the gold of one wife and the love of another.

When Mrs. Annie B. Sutherland Buchanan's body was exhumed, it was established that death had resulted from morphine poisoning. The reason that her eyes had given no indication of it was that the doctor had cleverly given her another drug which had counteracted the contracting effect of the poison.

So Dr. Buchanan's "perfect crime" missed by an eyelash of being perfect. Ironically enough, it was exactly a year to the day after the madam he didn't call madam died that a jury brought in a verdict that sent the doctor to the gallows.

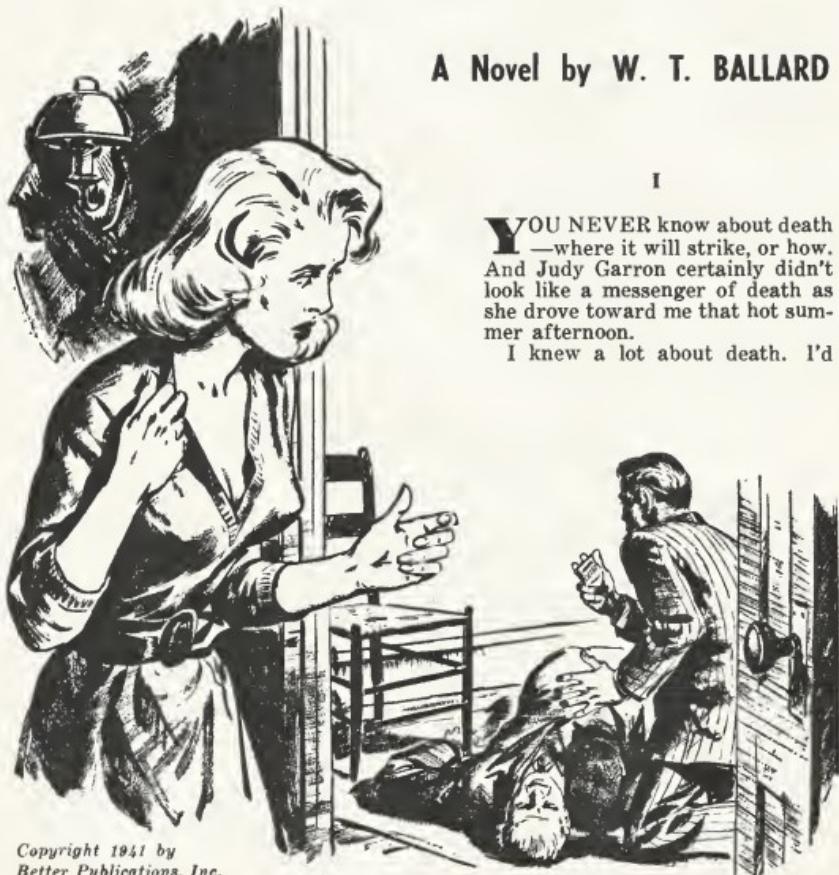
He's in the DEATH HOUSE

A Novel by W. T. BALLARD

I

YOU NEVER know about death —where it will strike, or how. And Judy Garron certainly didn't look like a messenger of death as she drove toward me that hot summer afternoon.

I knew a lot about death. I'd



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Mike was an oil man—but the stuff flowing in Texas was—blood!

been in the Near East five years, playing nursemaid to some Iranian oil wells. I'd seen a lot over there and I was lucky to get back. There were fifteen hundred on board a ship which had accommodations for nine hundred, but no one cared. All of us were as tickled as Punch when the Statue of Liberty finally hove into sight.

I'd left the U. S. because every place I went I'd somehow managed to get tang'ed up with death. It had haunted my footsteps through Texas, Oklahoma, and California until the various sheriffs kind of asked me to move on.

Maybe it was my curiosity, or maybe I should have been a detective, but whenever there was a killing around an oil field, I always managed to poke my snoot into the crime. It didn't matter that I'd helped to solve a dozen of them. The local law still didn't like my interference.

I knew that when I got back I'd be smart to stay away from my old stamping grounds, but the one thing I knew was oil, and all my friends followed the trail of the black gold. So I bought a copy of the *Oil News* and took a look at the headlines. Then I started for Templeton.

The headlines said that Templeton was the biggest oil town since Smack-over, East Texas, and Signal Hill, and where there is oil I'll have friends, and I can get a job. I can do everything with an oil well save drink out of it.

I was broke, so I hung my thumb up on the highway and hitch-hiked. I got a food salesman as far as Cleveland, a furniture transfer to Chicago. Going west, I wasn't having so much luck until a big coupé pulled up. There was a black-haired girl in it. I was surprised. Girls alone don't usually stop for hitch-hikers.

She opened the door and said:

"Get in, partner."

I got in, and we rolled along the highway.

"Where you headed?" she asked matter-of-factly.

"Templeton," I told her. "The name is Mike Foster, of Texas, Southern Cal, and Iran."

"I'm Judy Garron," she said. "I've heard of you, Mike Foster."

I STARTED at that. Then she told me that she was from Templeton, and I wasn't so surprised. Oil workers talk. They like to tell stories about their friends, and there were plenty that could be told about me.

All morning I sensed that the girl was studying me, and when we pulled up at noon, she asked:

"Solve any good murders lately?"

I grinned. "They don't have murders where I was—just liquidations. No one tries to solve them, because everyone knows who's responsible. Tell me about Templeton."

According to her story, the town was a little red wagon on wheels. It had been a nice little city of a hundred thousand, a little tough because of the distilleries and big foundry, but still pretty much under control—until oil came.

Now it was hog wild, with a half million people living in tents, trailers, anything to keep out the rain. It sounded like my kind of burg, my oyster.

I could smell it before we came over the hill and saw the forest of derricks. The main street was full of people. They were putting down a well in the middle of the boulevard and another on the court-house lawn. They'd be drilling in the basements and the cemetery next. When oil comes, nothing else matters.

The air had a greasy feel, and the smell of burnt oil was thick around us. It put a film on the windshield that wouldn't come off, and I knew that I was home.

The girl didn't share my excitement. She was quiet as she edged the coupé through the slow-moving traffic.

"Want to make a hundred dollars, Mike?" she asked suddenly.

I stared at her suspiciously. "You're not just trying to give me a lift? I don't take money from women."

She shook her head. "No. I've got some papers I want delivered to A. G. Peyton at the Palace Hotel. He'll be in his room at eight tonight. I don't want the town to know they came from me."

She parked the car, drew out a package, scribbled a note, then got five new twenties which she handed to me.

"Thanks, Mike."

I told her that she didn't need to give me the money, that I'd deliver the note

for nothing. But she shook her head.

"Thanks," she said, "and good-by."

I watched the coupé pull away, realizing that I didn't know where she lived or a blessed thing about her. But I meant to find out. Then I turned and went into the hotel.

The clerk soaked me fifteen a day for a little single and told me I was lucky to get it. The register had a smear of oil on it. The lobby resembled a miniature stock exchange—lease hounds buying, selling, and trading. I recognized several of them and several scouts from the major companies.

It was a wildcat field, but the big fellows were beginning to come in. That would mean pipe lines, development, progress, and it also meant that the little fellows would move on.

It was an old story. First the oil tramps with their little rigs and thin bank-rolls, then the gamblers, the girls, and the camp followers, and then the majors—order, law, and development. I'd seen it a thousand times.

Four men spoke to me on the way to the elevator. In half an hour, everyone would know that Mike Foster was in town. That was the way with oil camps. You didn't need a newspaper. The grapevine telegraph served instead.

My phone rang a dozen times while I was shaving. Pals from other days, saying hello, trying to sell me leases, offering me a job, or trying to borrow money. I said I'd see them all later, and hurried. I wanted something to eat before I delivered the package to Peyton.

IT WAS three minutes of eight when I finally knocked at Peyton's door. A heavy voice told me to come in, and I pushed the door open. Then I tried to back out, because the room was swarming with cops. Here was trouble, and I'd sworn off trouble.

"Wait a minute," a big, red-faced man barked. His captain's uniform looked mussed and dirty, and one of the gold buttons was missing.

"I must have come to the wrong room," I said, still backing.

"Come here!"

They reminded me of five vultures, sitting on a limb, waiting for something to die.

"Who are you?" the red-faced man demanded.

I told them. I told them that I was just in from looking for a job. I denied knowing Peyton, even when they took me into the next room and showed me the gray-haired man on the bed. Someone had beaten in his skull, using a blunt instrument. He'd been dead for ten or fifteen minutes.

That put me in the clear. I'd been kidding the cashier in the hotel dining room for the last half hour. I wasn't worried so much for myself, but the package the girl had given me to deliver was still in my pocket.

"I remember now," one of the cops said suddenly. "You're Mike Foster."

I looked at him. There was something vaguely familiar about his face, and I knew I'd seen him somewhere. But where?

The captain picked up interest. "You know this lug?"

The cop nodded. "Sure, that's Mike Foster. They used to call him 'Investigating Mike.' Why, out in Bakersfield, they had a double murder which the cops couldn't touch, and Mike solved it in two days. He can smell murder a mile away, and he comes running."

I cursed him under my breath. "Them days have gone forever," I told them. "I've reformed."

"You'd better," the captain growled. His name was Hammond, and he thought that he was tough.

There was a window behind me, one that opened on an air shaft. My room opened on the same shaft. I was afraid they'd search me, so I backed carefully to the window and when they weren't watching, let the package slide into the shaft.

The captain hadn't forgotten me. After a few minutes, he came back and started the questions all over again—whether I hadn't known Peyton, what I was doing up there. I told him I was looking for a job, that a man in the lobby had suggested that I see Peyton.

One of the other cops spoke from the far side of the room.

"Say, Skipper, I saw this lug getting out of Judy Garron's coupé."

The captain's face got black with rage.

"So you came here to help the Garrons!" He took a quick step forward and gathered a fistful of my vest with a big hand. "I should sock you in the mouth!"

My impulse was to hit him, but I was still trying hard to keep out of trouble. "Look, Skipper," I protested. "I told it straight. I hitch-hiked in here. Out on the road, a couple of hundred miles back, this girl picked me up. Why would I be here to help the Garrons? Who are they? Why do they need help?"

No one answered that. They took me downstairs, and the restaurant cashier alibied me for the time when Peyton was getting killed. After that they let me go, but with a warning.

"Move on, Foster. We don't want you trying to solve murders around this town. If you don't move on, you'll get hurt."

I stared the captain right in the eye. For five years I'd been pushed around by a lot of people, and it took more than a police captain to scare me. I told him that, then went back to my room, wondering what this was all about.

THREE was a little man inside, sitting quietly on the edge of my bed. He didn't look tough, but the gun in his hand did. It was very big and very black. I was only half through the doorway when I saw him, and I stopped.

"Come in, come in," he said. "Shut the door. What the devil are you standing there for?"

I came in and shut the door. He didn't look as if he made a habit of sitting on other people's beds with a gun in his fist. I said so, and he just grinned, then got serious.

"Miss Judy Garron gave you a package to deliver," he said. "I want it."

I stared at him. His round head had a fringe of mouse-colored hair which was beginning to gray. The top of his head was pink and as bare as a baby's cheek. He looked, sitting down, as if he'd scale five-five or five-six and weigh one-eighty. That kind of guy, as big around as he was long.

He wore a tan alpaca suit and a sport shirt and looked mild enough, but his eyes were the tip-off. They were gray and hard and dangerous.

"I don't know where you got your information," I said, "but most of it is wrong. I had a package to deliver to Peyton, but the cops got it."

He sighed. "Now, Foster, the cops didn't get it, and Peyton was killed before you could turn it over. It's not here in your room. I've searched."

I shrugged. "Looks pretty hopeless, doesn't it?"

His mouth tightened. "Shall I call the cops?"

"You won't," I told him. "I don't know where you fit in, or what this is all about, but I can tell that you don't want the cops any more than I do. By the same token, you won't shoot, so put the gun in your pocket."

I could tell by his eyes that he'd have loved to press trigger, but he only got off the bed and shoved the gun into my side.

"Try something and see if I'll shoot," he growled. "Now march into the bathroom and let me see what's on you."

I didn't think he would shoot, but there was one chance in a hundred he might, and I wasn't getting myself killed, yet. I marched, and he went over me thoroughly, not finding anything.

"Where's that package, Foster?" he finally snapped.

I just shook my head. He returned to the bed and sat down.

"All right. We'll just wait until one of us gets tired, or something happens."

II

SOMETHING happened almost at once. A knock on the door made the fat man turn his head. I'd been watching, and the minute his eyes shifted, I jumped for him. I had my hands on his wrist before he knew what had hit him. The gun flipped out of his hand, flopped over a couple of times, and rolled under the bed.

I went after it, expecting him to do the same. He fooled me. He jumped to his feet, leaped across the room like a bouncing ball, ripped open the door, and dived between the men outside, and raced down the hall.

They were too surprised to do more than stare after him. So was I. I was still on the floor with the gun in my

hand when they stepped forward into the room.

The man in front was big and blond and good-looking. He grinned when he saw me squatting there on my heels, nursing the gun.

"Hey, Mike," he said, "you said five years ago that you were swearing off murder investigating. What were you trying to do to Van Doan?"

I got up slowly. "Hello, Worth," I said, my tone cool. We'd never been friends, although we'd know each other for a long time. "Where'd you blow from?"

"I should be asking that question," Compton Worth said. "Me, I'm Templeton's best citizen. I've been here for six months, but I haven't seen you for years."

I told him that I'd been in Iran, and he introduced me to the man with him as his partner, Dean Hawkins.

I'd heard of Hawkins, but I'd never met him. He was a preacher-looking guy, tall, with straight black hair like an Indian's. I'd heard that he was the best salesman in the business, so good that even the Government mail inspectors fell for his line.

I laid the gun on the stand and Worth slapped my shoulder.

"Same old Mike—always mixed up in a murder," he said.

I didn't like the slap and I didn't like Worth. I wondered what the devil he was doing in my room.

"What have you got against Van Doan?" he asked. "Did he run a squib about you in his dirty scandal sheet?"

I shook my head. "You've got me," I told him. "I don't even know this guy you call Van Doan. Who is he? I walked into my room and found him perched on my bed with that gun trained on my middle."

My visitors exchanged glances.

"Van Doan runs the local paper," Worth said. "He and Peyton, the guy who got killed."

That didn't make any sense, so I asked:

"And how'd you happen to show up here?"

Worth's voice was easy. "We heard from some cons that a guy named Foster was mixed up in the Peyton kill. That

sounded like you so I came up to see and to see if we could help."

That didn't make sense, either. Worth was no friend of mine. He was one of the two kinds of people who hit the wildcat camps first—the small operators, gambling their own bank rolls in trying to open up a new field, and the lease hounds who hang around, not risking much but conversation and trying to cloud titles and chisel any way they can.

Worth was a lease hound. He had caused trouble for my friends in the past, and I'd thrown him and some pals off a rig at Santa Fe Springs. Whatever else he was, he was no friend of mine. He had come up here, wanting something. The question was—what?

But I was too smart to let him know how I felt. Instead I thanked him, and told him I needed a job.

He hesitated, then suggested, "You might see Petie Smith. I understand he wants a tool dresser out on Rig Five. Petie is a good guy to tie to in this town. He runs it."

I nodded. "Swell! Where will I find him?"

WORTH told me, then paused. "Look. Mike. I'm not butting in, see, but I heard the cops say that you rode into town with Judy Garron tonight. She didn't give you a note to Peyton, did she?"

I lied. "She didn't. Why should she give me a note?"

He shook his head. "Just an idea of mine. Well, be seeing you. Don't forget to see Smith."

"I'll go see him now," I said, and followed them out the door.

It was a big suite on the fourth floor that Smith used for an office. People were hurrying in and out, and I could hear a man's voice from the inner room. It was saying:

"—go out there and question her if you want to, but remember, you'll still take orders from me and like it."

I lost the rest of the conversation as a young fellow in laced boots and stained breeches asked me what I wanted.

I used Worth's name and in a few minutes walked through into the inner room. It was bare, save for one desk

and a single chair. There was a framed photograph of a girl on the corner of the desk with an inscription written in the corner:

Love to Petie

I stared at the picture. It had been six years since I'd seen the original of that photograph. Then I looked away from it to Petie Smith.

He was a big man with curly hair. His face was broad and square. He was staring savagely at a bunch of papers on his desk. I looked around and saw there was no other exit from the room, so whoever he'd been talking to a few minutes before must have been on the phone.

When he looked up, I saw that he had the coldest, grayest eyes that I'd ever seen. He smiled, but it was not from amusement, and it sent a shiver through me. His teeth had a lot of gold in them that glowed in the light.

"So you're Mike Foster," he said and added about what everybody else said, "I've heard of you."

Everyone in Templeton seemed to have heard of me. I nodded and went into my act. I wanted a job. I told him where I'd worked, what I could do—

He stopped me before I was half finished.

"Sorry, there isn't any job."

I stared into those gray eyes and I suddenly knew that I was scared to death. He was the first man who had ever made me feel that way, and it bothered me.

When I started for the door, he stopped me.

"I hear that you're a friend of the Garrons," he said.

This town was a regular sounding board. Everyone seemed to know everything about what was going on. I shook my head.

"Wrong. A girl I've since heard is Judy Garron picked me up on the road and drove me into town. That's all."

He looked at me with his stary eyes, and the skin at the back of my neck crawled.

"Don't make any mistakes," he said. "Garron's red-handed guilty. I know you're called 'Investigating Mike' and that you eat murders, but there's nothing you, Garron's sister, or anyone else

can do to save him."

I wet my lips. I hadn't known that Judy had a brother.

"What's this Garron guilty of?" I asked. "Where is he?"

The man behind the desk showed his gold teeth again as he smiled.

"Charley Garron murdered a guy. He's in the death house and he hangs tomorrow morning."

I whistled softly. Judy Garron hadn't said a word about her brother or her troubles. For that matter, why should she? I was a stranger to whom she'd given a ride. That was all. But I felt my interest climbing. Peyton's death hadn't stirred me. I knew nothing about the guy, had never seen him in life, and besides, I'd sworn off murder puzzles.

BUT THIS was different. The girl B had looked nice, about as nice as anything I'd seen in a long, long time. If her brother was innocent—

The man behind the desk must have read my mind.

"Now wait, Foster," he said quickly. "I just got through telling you that this was none of your business and I meant it. We don't like nosy guys around this town, and when I say 'we' I mean 'me.' Do you understand?"

I understood all right, but I started to argue. He cut me short, quick.

"I mean just exactly what I said. If you aren't out of town by tomorrow morning, I'll see that it gets tough for you here. That's all. Scram!"

I started to say something, then I didn't, for he had already picked up a fistful of papers from the desk and was going through them. I knew when to keep my mouth shut, and this was one of the times. I turned and left the room. As I went down the hall, I made sure that no one from Smith's room was tailing me. Once on my own room, I locked the door and set about getting the package from the air shaft.

I took a look first, then got the sheets and spread from the bed and knotted them together into a rope. That done, I tied one end to the radiator pipe and crawled over the sill. It wasn't as tough as it sounds. The brick wall was rough enough to get a toehold, and I let

myself down hand over hand.

The package was laying on top of a pile of rubbish. I picked it up and climbed back to my room without trouble. The trouble came in untying the sheets and remaking the bed, but the knots yielded finally, and I left the room.

As I stepped out, I saw that the narrow-faced cop was loitering beyond the elevators. I knew what that meant. The cops weren't forgetting me—not at all. I ignored him and rode down in the elevator.

I dallied purposely by the newsstand until he came boiling down the stairs. It was funny to see the expression on his face when he realized that apparently I was in no hurry to go any place. He'd been so certain I was trying to duck him, and that was the last thing I wanted the cops to think.

I waited until he had reached the lobby floor, then I bought a cigar, took time to light it, and wandered out onto the crowded sidewalk, for all the world like a man with a lot of time on his hands and no place in the world to go.

A lot of people were milling around in the street. It was after ten, but no one seemed inclined to go home to bed. It was hot, and the smell of oil hung over everything like a blanket.

I idled along the street, peering in at the various clubs. Hatchet-face wasn't far behind me. Finally I stepped into the door of the Gusher.

I hadn't meant to do more than take a look, but I saw Tom Martin standing on the deserted orchestra platform at the rear. For a moment I just stood there, then I pushed through the jam around the long bar and came up to the edge of the platform.

"Hi, Tom!"

I hadn't seen him for six years, not since he had pulled out of Texas, but he hadn't changed.

He turned around, saw me, and came over and gave me his broad, flat hand. The rest of him was broad and flat, too, even the nose that bisected his heavy face.

"Mike Foster!" He squinted at me. "You never lose them. Whenever oil shows, the boys come. I heard you were in Iran."

"The boys there didn't like it," I said,

"so I came home."

Tom grinned dryly. "Hey, Kate! Look who's here."

III

I TURNED around and watched Kate, who had been Tom Martin's chief hostess for a long time, elbow her way toward us. She was a tall girl, and her hips had a nice sway as she walked. She hadn't changed much, either. Her smile was still slow, her eyes still smoldering. I sensed the tautness of her as we shook hands. It had always been there—that tautness, pent-up explosiveness. Some time it would break loose.

"Come and have a drink, Mike," she invited. "Tom's busy. The orchestra went on a bender."

We moved to a table and sat down. The noise of the place welled up around us like swarms of bees. Kate's eyes were hot and questioning, as if she were mad about something.

"I heard you were in town," was all she said, though.

I looked at her. "What do you mean by that?"

"I heard Peyton got himself killed over at the Palace Hotel," she said, "and that the cops were holding a Mike Foster. I wondered if it could be you."

I took a long pull at the tall glass which a waiter set before me.

"You hear things—fast."

She didn't smile. "We have to hear things to stay in business in this town."

I leaned forward, lowering my voice. "Say, who was this Peyton, anyhow?"

Her smoldering eyes surveyed me. "You kidding?"

"So help me, I never saw him until the cops showed me the body," I told her earnestly.

She thought that over, then decided to talk.

"Peyton published the paper here—he and an old duck named Van Doan."

"And who killed Peyton and why?" I wanted to know.

Her lids dropped. "You ask a lot of questions, Mike. You always did, but in this town, every man takes care of himself. We don't muss into other people's murders."

I knew she was warning me, and that I should listen to the warning, but I couldn't get Judy Garron out of my mind and I couldn't forget the package of papers which she had given me.

"Then you know?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I don't, and I don't care. Peyton was always poking his nose into other people's business—he and Charley Garron." She sounded bitter.

I stiffened. "Who's this Garron who's in the death house?"

Again she shrugged, but watching her, I was sure that she was nervous.

this afternoon—two thousand barrels. They think they're rich."

She leaned forward across the little table, and I saw the chain around her white neck and the little ring at the end of it. The ring hung so that I could see the initials, "C. G."

"Married, Kate?" I asked suddenly.

She looked at me, startled. "What made you ask that?"

I TOOK my eyes away from the ring. I "Just wondered."

"No," she said too loudly. Then, as if realizing she had been abrupt, she

WE WUZ ROBBED!

A "clever" idea proved the downfall of a Newport News, Va., holdup man. He walked into a jewelry store and asked to look at a diamond ring, promptly pocketing the same. Then he asked to see a watch and did likewise. Since he had a pistol in his hand, the clerk didn't argue with him. But it was the gunman's next request that brought about his ruination. It gave the clerks enough time to call the police and have him arrested.

To prove he'd bought—not stolen—the stuff, he asked for a receipt for his merchandise!

—*Carter Crits*



"Garron was just a kid," she said slowly. "He went out one night to see a broker named Shephard. Shephard and his two partners, Compton Worth and Dean Hawkins, were selling leases on land which belonged to the Garrons. The story is that Shephard and young Garron had an argument. Shephard got shot, so now young Garron is in the death house. His sister raised heaven and earth to save him, and Peyton and Van Doan tried to help her."

I looked at her, but she had turned her head. Up on the platform, Tom was marshaling his orchestra. They appeared damp and unhappy, and I guessed that Tom had run them through a cold shower.

"How come they got tight?" I asked Kate.

Her eyes were indifferent as she turned her head.

"They've got an interest in a wildcat well," she said carelessly. "It blew in

added with a smile, "My kind doesn't get much chance to marry, but I'm moving on soon, Mike. I'll have dough and a guy. That's enough." She said the last as if she were trying to convince herself.

I was watching her closely when I asked:

"Who is Petie Smith, Kate? What makes him the big noise around here?"

She looked startled again and for a minute she didn't say anything. Then she shook her head and lied.

"I wouldn't know, pal. I never met the man."

Kate was lying. I knew she was lying and I wanted to know why. It was her photograph I had seen on Smith's desk, not so long before, inscribed "To Petie, with love," but there was no use arguing. There might be a hundred reasons why she would lie about it, none of which would concern me.

"I see that the cops are still checking

up on you," she said suddenly." Oscar's over by the bar now, watching."

I turned my head. The narrow-faced cop she had called Oscar was standing at the end of the bar. I grinned. The name Oscar fitted him. Then I stopped smiling.

"Look, sweetheart," I said to Kate, "he's been on my tail all evening, and I don't like it. Is there a back way out?"

She told me that there was, that the washroom window opened on an alley.

"Look, Mike"—she sounded serious—"forget the Garrons and get out of town. You won't, of course." Her voice changed, and she spoke lightly. "Well, good hunting. They live at Three-thirty-eight Maple Drive, in the West End."

I rose. "Thanks, kid."

She had brains, and I liked her, but I didn't trust her. When I got to the washroom door, I looked back. She had moved over to the bar and was talking to Oscar. That might be to cover my retreat—or it might not.

There was a bolt on the inside of the washroom door. I shot it into place and crossed to the window. It was an easy drop to the alley outside. I moved along it, missing the rubbish piles, and paused to peer around the corner into the side street. I didn't see Oscar or anything else that looked like trouble.

But as I stepped out from the shadow a shot hammered from across the street, and a bullet crashed against the brick wall not three inches from my head.

I jumped backward as a second slug whined down the darkness of the alley. This was getting hot. I turned and ran. I didn't know who was shooting at me and I didn't wait to find out. When I came out into the lights of the next street, I ducked around the corner, listening for pursuit. There was more.

Down the street I saw the lighted sign of the newspaper office. I went toward it, and once inside, I didn't waste any time. There was a young fellow in overalls behind the high counter. He was the only one there. I pretended to be from a Chicago paper and that Van Doan had sent me down to look at the files.

For an hour I read all about Petie Smith and Charley Garron and the murder. I was surprised to find that Smith

had a wife, an invalid who lived in a private sanitarium. I was also surprised at other things. Rummaging around in a desk and file cabinet in the room where the newspaper files were kept, I found a photostat of a marriage license and a full list of the oil holdings of Worth, Dean, Hawkins, Smith, and the other big operatives.

Several of those fellows were pretty well broke. If that information had ever managed to get into the papers, the public would have run them ragged.

THREE

THERE was a young, good-looking guy in the front office, talking to my overalled friend when I finished. I waited for him to leave before I came out.

"Who was that?" I asked.

The overalled one shifted tobacco from one cheek to the other. "That was Lawyer Cliff Reed," he informed me. "He wanted to see Van Doan."

I asked where Van Doan was, but he didn't know. I thanked him for his trouble, went out into the street after looking carefully around, got a cab and gave the driver Judy Garron's address.

The Garron house was white, a rambling old affair, set back in a full acre of tree-filled yard. There weren't any derricks around. There hadn't been any for a dozen blocks before I reached the place. That didn't surprise me. Oil pools are funny things. You can get sand or salt water within a hundred feet of a producing well.

I went up on the wide, old-fashioned porch and knocked. There was no bell. I was waiting, planning what I was going to say when the door opened, and Judy Garron stared out at me. I knew she was scared the minute I saw her, and I didn't understand why. Why should she be afraid of me?

For a full minute she stood there, then she started to shut the door. I had my foot in the way, and it wouldn't close.

"Wait a minute, Judy," I begged. "I'm here to help."

She acted as if she didn't believe me, and I fumbled around for a minute, hunting words. I didn't want just to hand her the package and scram. After reading the newspapers, I had a hunch

that her brother wasn't guilty. I wanted to talk to her. So I took a step forward, pushing the door open as I came.

She didn't try to stop me. She moved back, but she was still uncertain, still afraid. I shut the door and drew her package from my pocket.

"Peyton was dead when I got there," I told her. "The cops found him before I did."

"I know," she said. "I heard. I—" Her voice was little more than a whisper. Her eyes were on the package, and there was relief in them. "I was afraid the police had that."

I told her about the air chute and saw her eyes light up for an instant. Then they dulled again, and the fear was back in their depths.

"I'm sorry about the package," I said, "but it wasn't my fault. I spent part of that hundred you gave me. Here's the rest of it."

"Never mind," she said. "Keep it. Thank you." She was clutching the package.

I looked at her closely. "Look, Judy, I'm not trying to butt in, but I heard about your brother and—well, I'm not a detective or anything, but I—"

"I know all about you," she said. "Here"—she drew out the note she had written Peyton and extended it—"read this."

I'd seen her write that note in the car before she gave me the package. I took it and read:

This is Mike Foster. They call him "Investigating Mike" around the oil towns. Maybe he can help us.

I looked up and saw that her cheeks were flushed.

"Judy," I asked, "why did you write this? Why didn't you ask me to help directly?"

"I wanted Mr. Peyton's judgment before I asked you," she said. "That's why I asked you to deliver the package rather than deliver it myself."

"And now that Peyton's dead?"

She wet her lips. "I don't know." The fear was back in her eyes. "I—I heard that you know Compton Worth and that you went up to see Petie Smith—"

"Which doesn't mean that I wouldn't help you," I said. "I brought the pack-

age back, didn't I? Come on in here and let's talk it over."

IV

THERE was a door on the right, and I turned toward it. Judy tried to jump between me and the door, but I already had it open and was looking into the room beyond.

It wasn't the old-fashioned furniture which interested me. It was the body of a man. He lay sprawled grotesquely in the middle of a short-napped rug, dead. Kneeling, I saw that he'd been about sixty, with a fat red face and a double chin.

Someone had shot him, the bullet striking through the vest, directly under the heart. I moved the coat to take a look at the wound, and as I did, something gold glittered above the edge of the vest pocket.

I reached down and pulled it out—a gold badge. I stared down at the letters which were raised and crowned with blue enamel. They read: "CHIEF."

The girl caught her breath sharply. She came slowly into the room. I pulled a handkerchief from my pocket, wiped the badge with it, and slid the bit of gold back into the dead man's pocket. Then I straightened and turned to face her.

"Look, Judy. This gets worse. What was he doing here? Who killed him?"

She shook her head. "Honestly, Mike, I don't know. I went over to see Mr. Doan at the newspaper office as soon as I heard that Mr. Peyton was dead, and—"

I started. "Was Van Doan there?"

"No. They told me he was at the hotel but they couldn't reach him." She was still clutching the package.

"What's in that package?" I asked, nodding toward it.

She hesitated. "You know that my brother is accused of shooting Mr. Shephard. Well, the only witness was a bookkeeper named Boring. Boring testified that no one but my brother entered the office that night. Boring was working in the reception room and on the stand he swore that about nine o'clock Charley came in and went directly to Shephard's office. Then he said that

twenty minutes later he heard a shot in the inner room and when he went in, Mr. Shephard was dead at his desk, and no one was there."

I stared "But your brother—"

It was evident that she was restraining herself with an effort.

"There is a fire-escape outside the window. The evidence was that Charley shot Shephard, then went down the fire-escape."

"And what did your brother claim?" I asked.

She wet her lips. "He claimed that he came up to see Shephard and stayed only ten minutes. When he came out, Boring was not in the outer office. I talked it over with Mr. Peyton. His paper was for my brother during his trial, and Peyton told me that our only chance of getting the governor to commute the sentence was to break down Boring's testimony."

"And did you?"

She indicated the package of papers. "This is his affidavit. He swears in it that on the night Mr. Shephard was murdered, he stepped out of the office for a few minutes and admits that Charley could have left during that interval, and that someone could have gone up the fire-escape and killed Shephard."

I frowned. "Then why did he testify the way he did at the trial?"

"Because he got two threatening telephone calls, telling him that if he changed his testimony, the murderer would be pinned on him," Judy said.

"Okay," I told her. "All Boring has to do now is talk to the governor."

She shook her head. "He can't. He was found dead in his hotel room early this morning."

I swore under my breath. "Look, was your brother married?"

"Married? Of course not. Why do you ask?"

I SHOOK my head. "Who's behind all this? Who wants your brother out of the way?"

She hesitated. "I don't know. Worth and Hawkins were Shephard's partners. They're handling the old Garron farm, and if the wells come in, they'll owe us a lot of royalties. But I don't see how

Charley's death would help them. Petie Smith is the town boss and an old enemy of my father, but I can't believe that he would do this, just for revenge. Then there is a group of gamblers that Charley wrote a lot of articles about. The newspaper had been fighting them. They're headed by a man named Tom Martin."

I had been looking around while she was talking. Beside the fireplace, pitch had run out of some pine logs and made a kind of puddle on the floor. I stooped, looked at it, then got a piece of paper and picked some up, wrapping it and stuffing it into my pocket.

"Haven't you any friends at all?" I asked her then.

She nodded. "Mr. Peyton and Mr. Van Doan stood by. So did my brother's attorney, Cliff Reed."

"Where's he now?" I asked.

"He went up to the capital yesterday and—"

Her words died as there came a sound from the front porch, then the front door was pushed open.

We stared at each other for a moment in silence, then our eyes shifted to the body of the police chief. I was standing nearer the switch. I took two steps and clicked it off, then moved to the hall door and opened it gently.

Someone was coming along the hall. I could hear the girl breathing in the darkness behind me. It sounded so loud that I was certain the man outside must be able to hear it. But evidently he didn't, for the oncoming footsteps never faltered. I saw his shadow before I saw him, then he started to pass the door, and my hand shot out and grabbed his arm. I dragged him in, wrapping my arms around him.

He was strong but not as strong as I was. He fought to free himself, but I had his arms locked at his sides. I called to the girl to turn on the lights.

She pushed the switch, and the next instant I heard her gasp:

"Cliff!"

Something in her tone made me loosen my grip and step back. The fellow I had caught was about my age, a handsome guy with blond hair. His suit, I decided, had cost the better part of a hundred bucks, and he wore it as if he'd been

born to such apparel.

"Judy!" he exclaimed. "I didn't know you were here. I didn't see any light in the front part of the house, so I came right in."

All the time he was talking his eyes were on me. They were a dark blue and looked startling against the lightness of his hair.

She read the look and said:

"This is Mike Foster—Cliff Reed."

He didn't offer to shake hands.

"Foster," he repeated. "Then you're the guy the cops are searching the town for."

What he said was news to me, but I wasn't surprised. Nothing the cops of that town could do would have surprised me.

Cliff Reed stepped forward and around me, and for the first time saw the body in the middle of the floor. I heard him catch his breath sharply, saw him glance at me, then at the girl.

"Judy, what—"

"He was there when I came in," she said.

"And Foster?" He was speaking to her, but I answered.

"Wrong guess, Reed. I came after she did."

His hands had long fingers like a musician's.

"This is bad—bad," he groaned. "I've got to get downtown at once. This is terrible!"

"Cliff, did you have any luck at the capital?" Judy asked.

HE SHOOK his head. "No luck. The governor wouldn't listen. Without new evidence—"

"But I've got new evidence!" she exclaimed and held up the package. "Mike was taking it to Peyton, only Peyton was dead. We're going to take it over to Van Doan."

"Swell!" he said, but you could tell by the way he said it that his mind was on something else. "Swell! But the cops have to know about this business here. I'll go down and tell them, and it's going to be tough, finding the body of their chief in your house and all."

"We could put it out in the street," I suggested.

He looked horrified. "That would

make it worse. No, I'll go down and tell them. You get those papers over to Van Doan as quick as you can and tell him to call the governor."

He hurried out and he certainly didn't waste much time getting down the hall. I heard his motor start even before Judy and I were well on our way to the back door.

The yard was dark and full of wavering shadows from the distant street lamp. The girl was still carrying the papers and she didn't let go of them when we climbed into the big coupé.

She drove fast, even though the traffic on the boulevard was heavy. It seemed that no one in Templeton ever went to bed. I slid way down in the seat. There were cop cars out, and I didn't want to be spotted. I wished now that I was a long way from Templeton. Then I shot a look at the silent girl and forgot the wish.

Van Doan's house was a brick box such as mid-Western architects delighted in building twenty-five years ago. We pulled up in front and started along the walk. The porch light was on and so were a lot of the house lights. It looked as if Van Doan might have company, and my eyes narrowed. The company might be cops, and I wasn't wanting to run into any of the Templeton force at the moment.

When we got up on the steps, we saw that the front door was standing wide open. We crossed and rang the bell, the girl in front. Then she uttered a little cry and, peering over her shoulder, I saw what had startled her.

A man's feet were sticking out of the door to the right, the pointed toes and extra high heels looking familiar. I think I knew it was Van Doan before I pushed the girl aside.

The body was lying directly in the doorway. It was as if the little publisher had started to come into the hall, had found the intruder waiting for him, and had begun to step back. He had evidently caught the door jamb in falling, for there were marks in the white paint of the woodwork and particles of white paint under his nails. The body was still slightly warm, but I couldn't tell whether he'd been dead for ten minutes or an hour.

I turned to find Judy standing over me, her face so white that her lips looked as if they were made of red wax. The package of papers was clutched to her bosom, pressed there tightly.

I stared at the package, wondering what good it was, now that both Van Doan and Peyton were dead. I wasn't foolish enough to believe that without someone in authority to back her up, the girl had a chance with the governor.

Feet made sudden noise on the porch. Judy twisted, and I thought for an instant that she was going to run. I wanted to run myself. My first thought was that it was the police. But it wasn't.

Tom Martin was standing in the doorway, his dark face taut, a drawn gun in his hand. There were three men behind him—men who were only shadows at the moment. He came in, his legs stiff, walking in a kind of crouch. I've seen killers before, and I knew I was facing one now.

"Where's Van Doan, Mike?"

His tone expressed no surprise at seeing me—nothing. His men came in behind him. One carried a shotgun, its barrels cut off until they extended only a half dozen inches beyond the trigger guard. The other two had automatics.

V

FOR answer to Tom Martin, I pulled Judy Garron to one side. He started when he saw the body, then he stepped forward and spat directly into the dead man's face.

Something in the gesture brought rage pumping up through me. I'd never known Van Doan in life. The only time I'd seen him had been when he'd had a gun trained on my wishbone, but if it hadn't been for the girl, I would have smashed my fist into Martin's face.

As it was, I held a check rein on myself. I knew that if I started anything, we didn't have a chance. These men weren't there for fun.

"What did you want with him?" I asked as coolly as I could.

Martin turned his dark eyes toward me. "I was going to stop his lying sheet. You kill him?"

I shook my head.

"Did she?" He jerked his thumb to-

ward the girl. Again I shook my head.

He grinned crookedly, but it wasn't from mirth.

"Then both of you had better make tracks out of here. If the cops find you, you'll be tagged."

"We haven't done anything, Tom," I said.

He laughed, and it was one of the coldest sounds I have ever heard.

"What difference does that make?" he demanded. "There's a kid sitting up in the death house that's going to die at sunrise tomorrow unless you do something to stop it. As long as you keep horsing around, there's the bare chance that he won't die, so they'll tag you if you don't move out."

I studied him, trying to figure where he fitted into the picture.

"Look, Tom, you know me. You know that I've got a lot of friends among the drill crews and wildcatters. I haven't had time to look them up since I hit town, but a bunch of them are around, and if Mike Foster yells, they'll come running. It will take more than a bunch of cops to push me around."

He shrugged. "It's not my fight, Mike. I'm just advising you to get out of town, fast. Come on, boys."

They tramped out, and I looked across at the girl. I was beginning to get an idea. Someone wanted Charley Garron to hang, wanted it badly enough to kill Peyton and then Van Doan. The more I thought of it, the sorer I got. Judy had the evidence to win a reprieve, at least. That was, if we could make the governor listen, but evidently Reed, her lawyer, hadn't had any luck.

Then, too, the chief of police was dead out at her house, which wouldn't make the rest of the police love either of us. Whatever we did, we'd have to do quick. Why had the chief been killed? It didn't seem to make sense.

My eyes were on the package the girl still held, and I was thinking that if Van Doan or Peyton were still alive to call the governor, they might at least get a stay of execution. But they weren't alive. I looked at the body and then at the room beyond, then turned to the girl.

"Listen, Judy, does Petie Smith have any pull at the state capital?"

She stared at me. "Why, yes, of course. He has a lot of pull, but it doesn't help us. He wouldn't do anything for our family if it meant a million to him."

I gave her a smile that she didn't understand.

"He's going to tonight," I promised, "although he doesn't know it."

I stepped over Van Doan's body, crossed the room to the telephone, and dialed the operator.

"Get me the governor at the state capital. And tell him it's a matter of life and death."

I HEARD Judy draw in her breath sharply, but I couldn't turn my head. It didn't take long to make the connection—only a few minutes—but it seemed like hours to me.

I heard a man's voice say, "Governor's mansion," and I told him, "I've got to speak to the governor. It's a matter of life and death."

I suppose the secretary had heard that before, and he wasn't impressed in the least.

"Sorry," he said. "The governor has retired and has left orders that he is not to be disturbed. Call him at the capitol in the morning."

I schooled my voice, trying to get the flat, toneless sound just right. I said, sounding like a major-general issuing orders:

"This is Petie Smith of Templeton. Tell the governor that if I don't talk to him tonight, I'll never talk to him again."

There was silence at the other end of the wire. The secretary was evidently thinking it over.

"Just a moment, Mr. Smith," he said at last, "and I'll see what I can do."

I flashed a look at Judy. I might be a bum, I might be a nobody—but I'd got through to the governor and if I played my cards right, Charley Garron would not hang in the morning.

The governor sounded sleepy, and he didn't exactly sound pleased, but he did answer the phone.

"Hello, Smith," he said. "What's on your mind?"

I told him, still using the flat tone without inflection of any kind:

"Young Garron is slated to hang to-

morrow morning. You'd better issue a stay. New evidence has come up."

His voice sharpened. "But I thought you were certain of his guilt."

"There's been two more murders in Templeton tonight," I said. "Certainly Garron couldn't have pulled them, and the main witness against Garron has changed his testimony. Think it over. You're going to look like a fool after it's proved that an innocent man has gone to the gallows."

His voice got more lively, and I could tell that he was no longer half asleep.

"What is this new evidence?"

"Grant a stay for forty-eight hours," I told him. "I'll send the evidence up to the capital. I'm sending a man named Foster—Mike Foster."

He hesitated. "Let me think about this and call you back."

"That won't do any good," I told him hurriedly. "A forty-eight hour stay won't hurt anything."

He made his decision. "All right. Forty-eight hours, but it had better be good." The receiver clicked at the other end, and I turned around.

The girl's face was very, very white.

"But, Mike, they can put you in jail for doing that," she said.

I nodded. "Yeah, but they can't put me in the death house. That's where your brother is, Judy." I was being purposely cruel. I had to snap her out of it. "Come on, we've got to get moving."

"Moving? Where?"

"We've got to go down and see Smith," I told her. "The chances are the governor won't call back, but he may, and if he does, we've got to be ready for him."

"But, Mike—"

"Listen, sweetheart. I'm tired of being pushed around. I came into this town looking for a nice, quiet job, and from the first moment I hit here, people have been taking pot shots at me. So we're going to take a few ourselves before these cops find all the bodies."

She didn't argue, just followed me out to the big coupé. I still had the gun I'd taken from Van Doan. I went around the coupé and got into the driver's seat. She climbed in, and we headed downtown.

THE lobby of the Palace was pretty well deserted, but my old friend Oscar, the cop, was standing beside the cigar stand, looking unhappy about the whole business. He did a double take when we came in, and for an instant I thought he was going to stop us. But he changed his mind and stayed where he was as we crossed to the elevator.

The boy who was running the car thought that Petie Smith was still in his room, but he wasn't sure. We got out at the fourth floor and went down to Smith's room. He was alone when we went in, still working at his desk, and he was surprised to see us.

His eyes narrowed on me, then widened when he recognized the girl. He didn't say anything, and I didn't either. I just took the package of papers from the girl and laid it on his desk.

"Read what's in that," I said.

He tore open the package, read the affidavits, then he looked up.

"Well?"

"You're going to call the governor and get a stay for Charley Garron," I said.

"No."

My smile was pretty mirthless. "You've already called him, Smith. Rather, I called him in your name."

His face started to get red.

"Why, you—" He snatched for the phone, but I stopped him. Van Doan's gun was peering at him over the edge of my coat pocket.

He saw the gun and let go of the phone. In that instant he had gained control of himself, and he was a lot more dangerous now than he had been a few minutes before.

"All right, Foster," he said coldly. "What do we do now?"

I told him to stand up and face the wall. He was clean—not a sign of a gun on him. Then I pulled out the desk drawers. There was a .45 automatic in the top left-hand one. I stuck it in my pocket and motioned him to sit down.

The phone rang sharply. I picked it up with my left hand. It was the governor.

"I want to talk to Petie Smith," he said.

"You are talking to Smith," I told

him. "Yeah, I called you. . . . No, I've got evidence right here, and it's conclusive. . . . Yes, I'll send it to the capital first thing in the morning."

I hung up, and the man behind the desk stirred.

"Keep on, Foster," he drawled. "You're digging the grave deeper and deeper."

I shrugged. "You might as well be buried for a heel as a wise guy. The flowers won't smell any sweeter when you're dead, but you're playing the fool, Smith."

That jolted him a little, and his eyes got narrow. He was a wise guy, but the trouble was that he'd been so busy being mad he hadn't spent much time thinking.

"What are you talking about?" he demanded.

"You run this town, don't you?" I asked. "Well, young Garron's going to be cleared. If you were smart, you'd play along and get the credit."

Smith was watching me with those narrowed eyes.

"What makes you think young Garron is innocent?"

"One thing's certain," I said. "He didn't kill Peyton and Van Doan, unless he managed it by remote control from the death house. You've got a chance to help, Smith. If you don't, I'll just have to hold you somewhere and go to the governor as your representative."

"All right, you win," he said suddenly. "I'll help, but where do we start?"

I shrugged. "It's pretty obvious, isn't it, that whoever is killing these men is doing it to make sure that young Garron dies? The question is, why? What good does his death do anyone?"

Smith was squinting at us thoughtfully. "I wonder—I hadn't thought about it that way. In fact, I haven't been thinking about it much at all. Peyton and Van Doan had been fighting me, and when they lined up behind Garron, I kept my hands off."

I nodded. "What about Compton Worth and his partner, Dean Hawkins? They're handling the lease on the old Garron farm."

Smith paused a moment, then said, "Let me use the phone."

WHEN I nodded, Smith picked up the phone.

"Ring Worth's room, will you?" he said to the switchboard operator. He waited, humming tonelessly under his breath. "Worth? . . . Smith. Listen, you and Hawkins get down here as fast as you can and bring your records on that Garron property with you."

He hung up, and his traplike mouth was tight.

"Listen Foster"—he glowered at me—"I wasn't mixed up in these killings. I don't want any part of them. It's hard enough to hold this town together without looking for trouble. But you've got me into this now by calling the governor. We've got to clean this whole thing up before morning, or I'll make you hard to catch."

I didn't answer. I still had Van Doan's gun in my pocket and as long as I had that, I was calling his shots for him.

There was a noise at the door, and Worth and Hawkins came in. Worth had a large briefcase under his arm, and both men wore dressing robes over pajamas. Worth stopped when he saw me, and swore under his breath. Hawkins paused just inside the door and stood there, his back to the wall, both hands sunk in the pockets of his robe. I couldn't tell whether he had a gun or not.

"Mike, where in hell did you come from?" Worth demanded. "The cops are searching the state for you."

I showed my surprise. "For me? One of them has been on my tail for most of the evening."

His eyes flicked toward Judy, then back to me.

The police chief went out to the Garron home early this evening. He didn't come back. When they went looking for him, they found him—dead."

"Then the cops will be up here in a few minutes," I said. "One of them spotted us as we came in through the lobby. Look, Worth, how did you get control of the Garron farm?"

He stared at me, and his face got a little red.

"One of the boys in the band at the

Gusher Club got me the deal from young Garron," he finally admitted.

"And you have to pay a royalty to the Garrons," I said.

He nodded. "I'll say we do. About the biggest royalty that ever was paid. When those wells come in out there, young Garron will be a millionaire."

I nodded. "But you can't take it with you, and young Garron will be dead. His heirs get it, then?"

Worth nodded. "Sure," he said, and every eye in the room was turned to Judy Garron.

"A well came in this afternoon," I said suddenly. "A well that the band down at the Gusher had an interest in. Was that well on Garron land?"

Worth nodded, and I turned to Smith.

"Call the police. They'll be up here in a few minutes, anyway. Have them pick up the whole band from the Gusher Club and bring them over here. Better have them bring Tom Martin and, yes, the singer—Kate."

He was already reaching for the phone. I looked toward Judy as I finished.

"Better get hold of Cliff Reed, too. Miss Garron may need a lawyer before this is over."

He made the call, and we waited.

Some of the cops got there first. I guess Oscar had sent in the alarm. They were going to get tough until Smith stopped them. It seemed that the chief had had a tip to go out to the Garron house alone, had gone, and had been killed.

The cops were plenty sore. It was lucky for me that Smith was there, and it made me realize what a spot I was in. I had to find the murderer, or else. If I didn't deliver before morning, Smith would turn me over to their wrecking squad.

THREE were six boys in the band, and they were pushed into the room along with Kate and Tom Martin. Kate gave me one of her unreadable smiles, but her eyes had a friendly, inviting look. Martin was sore and noisy about it until he saw Smith, then he was suddenly silent.

Cliff Reed hurried in, saw the crowd, and stopped for an instant in surprise.

Then he crossed the room quickly and put an arm around Judy's shoulders.

Smith had a faint trace of a smile on his lips.

"Okay, Foster, it's your party."

I felt a little like a high school boy making a first speech. I looked at Kate.

"Listen, pal," I said, "you told me tonight that the band had a share in an oil well that came in. Who gave them that share?"

"Charley Garron," she said.

I turned to the band boys. "That right?"

Each nodded his head dumbly.

"Why?" I shot at them. "Why should Garron go around giving you boys a share? Did he gamble with you? Did he—"

One of the boys hesitated, glancing at Martin from the corner of his eyes.

"I—we—we played at his wedding. He gave it to us then."

I shot a quick glance at Judy. Her face was the picture of amazement.

"Who'd he marry?" I asked quickly.

"Me. Anything wrong with that?" Kate stepped forward to face me, her

eyes hot, challenging.

I shook my head. "Nothing, Kate. If your husband hangs, you'll get more than a million from oil royalties. It might look to some as if you wanted him to hang."

She flushed, and her eyes darted around the room.

"That's a lie!" she cried. "I did everything I could do help him at the trial, but it was no soap. He killed Shephard, and I couldn't save him. A girl has to look after herself."

I nodded. "Yes, a girl has to look after herself." I was talking to Kate but I was watching Tom Martin. "So you're going to take your million and go away with another man. Well, that would be fine—only your husband isn't guilty, and he isn't going to hang."

She stared at me, not believing it, then she started to say something. I stopped her with a motion of my hand and faced Reed.

"Did you know that Garron was married?" I asked the lawyer.

He hesitated a little. He shouldn't have, for Judy Carron was watching him with a peculiar expression.

"Did you?" I persisted.

"All right, I did." He sounded sullen. "But it was my client's business. Charley Garron asked me not to tell, not even Judy. I'm not in this, Foster. If you're trying to suggest that I'm planning to go away with Kate, you're crazy."

I shook my head. "No, Reed, I know who killed Shephard. I've known it for some time. I know who killed the police chief, and why. The chief was thinking for himself, refusing to take further orders. I know what Tom Martin's part in the whole mess was, too. He was trying to cover up for somebody else—somebody he likes."

I had Van Doan's gun in my hand, pointing it at Smith, who, oddly enough, had slapped on his hat.

"The game's up, Petie. Look at your shoe. You stepped in some pitch out at the Garron place. You left tracks there and in Van Doan's hall."

Even as I spoke, I realized that Kate's picture had disappeared from his desk.

He ripped open his desk drawer, for-

He DIDN'T Knock

He thought it would be fun to walk in on the couple's loving, but when he entered their bedroom—he vanished!



YOU'LL DIE LAUGHING

by Bruce Elliott

is only one of three sensation-packed novels in the Summer Issue of

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getting that I'd taken his automatic. Then he closed it, his face expressionless.

"You're just talking, Foster, because you're in a jam. You can't prove a word you've said."

Kate was staring at him. "Why, you dirty, murdering rat! And you pretended that you were trying to save Charley!" She swung around. "I made a deal with Smith!" Her voice was high. "He was to try to save Charley from the chair, to get him a life sentence instead. In return, I was to go away with Petie."

"He couldn't do that," I told her, "because as long as Garron lived, you wouldn't have inherited the money."

"I see that now," she said. "Well, I'll fix him! I know some things myself. I'll—"

He leaped directly at her across the desk, grabbing her shoulders and pulling her slender body down into a chair between us before I could shoot. But it did him no good. The plainclothesmen there had guns. One had his gun uplifted as he leaped forward to brain Smith, but another one fired twice. Petie Smith was dead. . . .

The highway looked long and winding in the early morning sun. I hadn't been in bed. I'd spent the night explaining to the cops. The unpublished information I'd dug up at the newspaper office had backed me up. And that marriage licence I'd found had helped—it was a license for Kate and Charley Garron to marry.

Kate, Tom Martin, and Compton Worth talked. Smith, it seemed, had had a phony option on the Garron property on which he had borrowed a lot of money from Shephard. Shephard had threatened to expose him, so Shephard had died.

Then Smith had promised to use his influence with the governor to intercede for young Garron if Kate would go away with Petie. Peyton and Van Doan had got wise and had talked to the police chief who, after calling Smith, had gone out to find out from Judy if her brother really was married.

The surprising part was that no one else had figured it out. I guess they'd all been so impressed with Smith and

his power that they hadn't added two and two together.

A big coupé was coming down the road. I didn't see who was in it until it was braked to a stop. Then Judy Garron opened the door.

"Trying to run out on me, huh?" she accused.

I fumbled around for words. I'd seen the way Cliff Reed had looked at her the night before. I finally said so.

She smiled at me. "You're not so good at figuring things out, Mike. Cliff has been asking me for years, and I'm still saying no."

I got in. "Where do we go from here?" she asked.

I looked at her and shrugged. "All I know is oil, Judy."

Her smile widened. "Then we follow oil."

She swung the coupé in a circle, and we headed back toward Templeton. Every wildcatter in town celebrated that night. They drank the town dry at our wedding. But there were no lease hounds present at the festivities. My friends saw to that.

• • •

The murder led Johnny from a girl in a sparkling G-string and transparent bra—to a sizzling fifty grand, red with blood!

REUNION

WITH

DARKNESS

A Novel of Today's Underworld

by WILLIAM DEGENHARD



Featured NOW in July

POPULAR DETECTIVE

On Sale at All Stands



Officer Flannigan



Sally Pratt

FOR ONCE in his life, Inspector Pratt was being told off—and by a slip of a girl, at that. A tiny blonde with big, blazing blue eyes. Calling him every name in the book, she was, and the only reason he didn't throw her into a cell was because she called him "Daddy" too.

"Daddy," she screamed at him, "you're nasty! You're stubborn! You're a stubborn old fool!"

Old fool! Sure, it did my heart good to sit there and listen to it. And all the inspector could do was yell back.

"All right, so I'm mean!" he yelled. "So I'm nasty! I'm stubborn! All right! But, by heaven, no daughter of mine is going to marry a cop!"

He banged his desk so hard that Kelly of homicide, across the hall, peered in and then tip-toed softly away.

Maybe, I thought, I'd better be getting out, too. I stood up.

The inspector whirled. "Murphy!" he boomed. "Where do you think you're going?" I sat down again.

Then he shook his finger at this slip of a girl. "What's more," he yelled, "a

patrolman! Seven years and still a patrolman!"

"You're just mean!" the girl cried. "You wouldn't let me marry Flannigan even if he was a detective! Well, Mr. Meanie, you can't stop me, see?"

I closed my eyes, waiting for the next explosion. But it didn't come. The office grew quiet. Strangely, suddenly, suspiciously quiet.

And then I could feel my heart bouncing around my liver. Sure, and this fine little girl had said the wrong thing. And Pratt knew it.

"Sally," he said, quiet-like, "you're wrong. You're doing your father an injustice." Mealy-mouthed, he was. "I won't stand in your way, Sally."

She said, "What do you mean?"

"Go ahead and marry him, Sally, if that's what you really want. Just as soon as he gets to be a detective, go ahead and marry him."

"Daddy," she cried, "are you serious?"

"Dead serious. The minute he makes detective, you can set your wedding day."

Oh, no, you think. Nobody could do

*Inspector Pratt—the fat slob—hadn't reckoned on Murphy
when he said no daughter of his would marry a mere cop!*

THE LITTLE SLEEP

By PHILIP WECK

that. Nobody would deliberately keep a man down just to stop a wedding.

No? Come around sometime and meet my fine old friend, Inspector Pratt. The slob.

"And now," he said, "the commissioner wants me."

So he walked out. The girl sat there, quiet, and I sat there with my nose in the regulations book, trying to memorize it. Not for long. Pretty soon I heard her behind my chair.

"Murphy," she said, "what's that fat slob up to?"

I should tell her? I should break her cute little heart? Not Murphy.

I got up, too. "Maybe he means it," I lied. I put my arm around her shoulder. "Maybe he's changed his mind." I tucked her under the chin. "Besides, you shouldn't call him a fat slob—even if he is."

Sure, and the doorknob had to click right then. There was the inspector, in the doorway, glaring at us. In five minutes he'd seen the commissioner? With the commissioner in Florida?



"You!" Inspector Pratt bellowed. "Come out with your hands up!"

SALLY beat it. I couldn't. I sat down to study the regulations some more, but I didn't get away with it.

"Sergeant," he said, mealy-mouthed again, "you're on the lieutenant's list, aren't you?"

Sure I was. For two years I'd been on that list.

"Your superior officer couldn't recommend a promotion for a man who doesn't show good judgment. You know that, don't you, Sergeant?"

I said, "Yes, sir."

"For thirty years," he said, "my wife sits home waiting for me. She doesn't know what time I'll get in or do I get in at all. She doesn't know will I walk in with the bacon in my hand or will they carry me in with a slug in my back. For thirty years she prays that the other fellow's aim is bad—and mine, too."

"By heaven," he roared, "no man who wants a girl to marry a cop is showing good judgment! You get that, Sergeant?"

He banged his desk so hard I watched out the window for the roof to go sliding by.

"Do you get that, Sergeant?" he yelled.

I said, "Yes, sir."

"A fat slob, am I?" he said.

Well, maybe he had a point there. Maybe.

He had a point the next morning, all right. On the transfer list. Flannigan, Joseph, Patrolman, Badge No. 834, transferred to the 21st Precinct.

The 21st Precinct is in what they call the Triangle, between East River Drive and the cemetery. It's residential and quiet, and the only calls the cops ever get are when a kid locks himself in the bathroom.

I never heard of a cop making detective because he knew a better way to smash open a bathroom door. Sally and Flannigan, Joseph, Patrolman, would have a long time to wait.

Sally got the same idea. That afternoon, when the inspector was out, she telephoned.

"Murphy," she said, "what's the hottest case in the department?"

"And what are you up to?" I asked.

"Never you mind. What's the hottest case, Murphy?"

"Those safecrackers in the Fifth Precinct," I told her.

"Thanks, Murphy," she said. "Safecrackers, Fifth Precinct. You're a doll."

I said, "No, I'm not. I'm a fat slob."

The kid did it, too. For a week, the newspapers said, Patrolman Joseph Flannigan, on off-duty time, had gone into the Fifth Precinct, the smelly, slummy, filthy Fifth, every single night, and picked up a tip here, a clue there, and finally a whole gang of safecrackers. With a bit of help from a mysterious blonde the papers didn't know much about. It wasn't hard to figure who the blonde was.

That was Monday. I hid the papers in my desk and waited for the storm. But it didn't come. Inspector Pratt spent the day in the office of his buddy, the district attorney, and he didn't say a word to me.

ALL WEEK the papers were full of Flannigan. Monday he booked the prisoners. Tuesday he testified at a hearing. Wednesday it was an arraignment that the D.A. postponed so he could get his mug in the Thursday papers, too, with Flannigan's. It looked like the kid couldn't miss his promotion.

But not to Murphy. Not with the D.A., Pratt's old pal, in the background. Somewhere I thought I caught the odor of a rat. Thursday I knew I smelled it when I read in the paper, "Flannigan has been put on night duty to allow him to appear in court and also to testify before the grand jury tomorrow and Saturday."

Now how does a fine lad find time for his gorgeous slip of a girl while that goes on? Or for sleep?

Friday morning I was half out the door when Pratt called me back.

"Sergeant," he bellowed, "today we're on night duty. Get a car and pick me up at four o'clock."

You don't talk back to Pratt while the phone is off the hook. I said, "Yes, sir." At four, I had a car waiting; at five, we were cruising the 21st Precinct, me with the smell of that rat strong in my nostrils, him with a list on his lap checking something off each time we passed a district car.

We made the whole precinct that way.

The 21st has seven cars, and we passed all seven.

"Okay," said the Inspector, "we'll go around again."

After some chow in a diner, with him glaring at me while he shoved it away, we went back around the 21st.

We'd spotted the third car for the second time when a call came in on our radio.

"Car 90," the announcer said, "Call your station. Car 90, call your station."

Car 90 was one of those we'd passed on the first trip around.

"Well," said Pratt, "the boy has friends."

Car 90 didn't acknowledge the call.

We made the fourth and fifth 21st Precinct cars, 87 and 88. Then car 89. A half-hour passed. No car 90.

The kid was asleep. Sure as shooting, he was parked in some spot where he thought he wouldn't be seen, sawing it off.

And here was Pratt, with that nasty grin, ready to pounce.

About ten o'clock we hit East River Drive, headed north. On one side was the river, on the other side the cemetery, and behind the cemetery a big bluff with the Wildcat Brewery on top. For a mile there's no road intersecting, except a lane behind the cemetery.

"Sergeant," Pratt said suddenly, "take a right."

"Yes, sir," I said. I headed for the next stop light.

"Sergeant!" he yelled. "Pull up!"

I pulled up.

"Sergeant," he roared, "you know who I am, don't you?"

I said, "Yes, sir."

"Then, by heaven, you make a right turn when I tell you to!"

I said, "I thought you meant the next through street, Inspector."

"Turn around!" he screamed.

So I turned around and headed into that lane.

"Turn off your lights!" the Inspector yelled when we hit it.

I turned 'em off. It was just a little dirt lane, and we bounced in and out of the ruts like a Martini in a shaker. The brewery atop the bluff had a neon cat on its roof, and the red from the neon was the only light.

NOW, THERE'S nary a bit of black magic in the Murphy clan. I didn't know the kid would be there. But if anybody can tell where a cop's likely to hide for forty winks, it's two other cops.

Sure enough, there it was, halfway up that lane, parked behind a couple of trees—car 90.

Fat Pratt leaned forward and whispered, "Pull up behind him and don't make a sound. Don't blow your horn, don't show your lights."

Sure and he forgot about the brakes. Sure and so did I. We hit the rear of car 90 like a fullback hitting the line.

"By heaven!" Pratt bellowed. "Murphy, that was intentional! I'll get your badge!"

The kid came bounding out then. You could see the sleep in his face—cheeks puffed, eyes half closed, hair mussed. Pratt climbed out and met him, and I followed.

"Officer," Pratt bellowed, and the headstones rippled, "you were sleeping on duty!"

Like he'd been struck, the kid stopped. A yawn stuck halfway, and he stood there with his mouth open.

"Officer," Pratt hollered, "what's your name?"

"Why, it's Flannigan," the kid said. "You know me, Inspector. I'm Sally's—"

"Officer," Pratt boomed, "do you know what this means?" He pointed to the fancywork on his shoulders.

"Why, sure. You're an inspector."

"It means you're supposed to salute me, Officer!"

Flannigan slowly straightened up and saluted..

Pratt brought out his notebook. "What's your name, Officer?"

"Flannigan. Joseph Flannigan, sir."

"Number?"

"Eight thirty-four, sir."

"You know what this means, don't you, Officer?"

Flannigan poked around in the dirt with one shoe. "Yes, sir. But I wasn't asleep, sir."

"Then, by heaven," Pratt roared, "what were you doing out here? Looking for a ghost?"

The inspector has a sense of humor like the rest of him. Sloppy.

"Well," said Flannigan, "I was—I was looking for someone, sir."

"Looking for someone? Who?"

The big neon cat flashed on, making everything red. The trees, the cars, even fat Pratt, the very Old Nick himself in a baggy red uniform.

Flannigan sighed. "The cat burglar, sir."

"The cat burglar!" Pratt roared. "Who's the cat burglar?"

Well, he's a—a purse-snatcher, sir, and a second-story worker. That's why we call him the cat burglar, sir. We always call them cat burglars."

"And where's the second story around here?"

The kid scratched his shoe in the dirt again. "He—I mean, I just sort of figured he'd come along here, sir."

"Oh, you did? Why?"

"Well, he didn't go anywhere else. I mean we never found him anywhere else, sir. So I sort of thought maybe he'd be around here."

The inspector filled his fat lungs with a fat breath. "Flannigan," he roared, "you're lying!"

The kid looked sick.

"I'm going to your station," Pratt yelled, "and if I find out this cat burglar is phony, you're washed up. Get that?"

"Yes, sir," said the kid, sort of whispering.

The inspector got back into our car. "Murphy!"

BUT I HUNG behind. "Flannigan," I said, "you better find yourself a cat burglar in a hurry."

He kicked at the dirt. Then he grinned, a sorry grin. "The desk sergeant, O'Brien, is my sister's husband. Maybe I can."

"Murphy!" the Inspector bellowed.

So I got behind the wheel again.

"Twenty-First Precinct, Murphy!"

I knew the 21st Precinct like I know Pratt's bellow, but somehow I got lost that night. I missed all the stop lights, and when we finally reached the station-house, I figured the kid had had plenty of time for a telephone call.

Pratt walked right into the lieutenant's office, slamming the door behind him, and I eased up to the desk sergeant's wicker cage.

"You get a call from Flannigan?" I asked.

The desk sergeant was busy writing but he said, "Yeah. About five minutes ago."

"Can you fix it?"

He's a pretty good man, O'Brien is. "I done my best. But the lieutenant—"

We both stared at the lieutenant's door. It looked just like it had looked when Pratt slammed it.

Well, I was into it now. Might as well go all the way. I fished out a nickel and hit the public phone. There I called the press room at headquarters and asked for Frank Easton.

"Frankie boy," I said, "this is Joe Murphy. I want you to be doing a little job for me, Frankie. A nice story about a cat burglar in the Twenty-First Precinct."

Frank didn't answer right away. Then he said, "What is it, Joe? A gag?"

"Would I be giving you a phony tip, Frankie?"

"Well, okay, Joe," he said. "That cat stuff is corny, but I'll see what I can do. What's the lowdown?"

I told him to call O'Brien in a half hour for particulars. Then I hung up.

Pratt and the lieutenant were in a corner going over the complaint book.

"How about it?" I asked O'Brien.

He grinned. "The lieutenant hasn't looked at the book in a month. He was afraid to open his mouth."

"So you got a cat burglar?"

"So we got one," O'Brien said.

Frank Easton is a good boy. The story was on page three next morning. It sounded new, even though the only complaints O'Brien had dug up were two or three weeks old. I read it, lit up my pipe, and felt pretty good.

Then Pratt called. "Murphy," he said, "four o'clock tonight again."

"It's Saturday," I told him.

"Four o'clock, Murphy," he said.

"Yes, sir," I said. Then I said, "You fat slob!" I was careful to put the phone back on the hook before I said it, though.

So I met him at four o'clock.

"Twenty-First Precinct, Murphy," he said as he climbed in.

Now what was he after? I smelled that rat again. Murphy, my boy,

watch your step. He's a smart one, this Pratt.

He was, too. He marched into the station, grabbed the complaint book and spent a half hour making notes. Then he got back into the car and gave me an address on Estes Avenue.

On the way, he lit a cigar and set up a smoke screen. Then he said, "Murphy."

"Yes, sir."

"You've been at headquarters a couple years, haven't you?"

Sure I had, and he knew it. What now?

"You know the newspaper boys pretty well, don't you?"

Murphy, he's on to you. The pig-head.

"Newspaper publicity isn't good for the department, Murphy," he said. "Sometimes it blows up in your face."

"Yes, sir."

"People read about cat burglars and they think every shadow they see is one."

"Yes, sir," I said.

The place on Estes Avenue was a brick home. Pratt got out and said, "Come with me, Sergeant."

Some fellow who looked like a book-keeper answer the doorbell.

"Are you the man who reported a cat burglar two weeks ago?" Pratt asked.

"Am I what?"

"Did you report a burglary two weeks ago?"

The man yelled, "Hey, Martha!" and a woman came out, her hair in curlers.

"Did you report that bum who stole my pants?" the man asked.

She stared at the inspector and then at me and she said, "I certainly did! I certainly did! I reported it the very next week and I haven't heard a word since! Not one word!"

"Lady," the inspector asked, a wee bit louder, "did you say this man was a cat burglar?"

She stared at him again. "A what? A cat burglar? What kind of a joke is this?"

"Where were the trousers stolen from?" Pratt asked. His face was turning red.

"Where were they? Why, right in the back yard, that's where! Right on the line where I hung them out to air. I told

you that when I called. What's the matter with you policemen? Don't you ever remember anything? Can't you—"

"Just a minute, lady!" the Inspector cut in.

She stopped.

"Thank you," he said. Then he walked off the porch, and we got into the car and drove away.

I wasn't very happy. Sure and now I knew what that slob was up to. He was tracing every one of those cat burglar reports.

Next was an address on Ridge Park Road... Good-by, Flannigan. Good-by, Murphy. . . . This place was one of those ranch houses, all on one floor. A kid could hoist himself in through the windows.

"Cat burglar!" the inspector muttered. "Cat burglar! . . . Murphy!"

"Yes, sir."

This time he had a number on 23rd Street.

One by one, he was kicking over those complaints O'Brien had given him.

OF ALL THE filthy tricks! He was going to bust that kid if he had to spend all the taxpayers' money, and bust me on top of it.

Yeah, me. Almost Lieutenant Murphy. Used-to-be Sergeant Murphy. Patrolman Murphy tomorrow.

The radio squawked. "Code 39! Code 39!" The announcer gave an address on 23rd.

Code 39 means a burglary, and this was only a block from us.

"We ought to take that, Inspector," I said. "We're right on top of it."

Before he could answer, I whipped around and made a right.

He said, "Sergeant, you'd better pray this doesn't have anything to do with a cat burglar."

I swung past an old jalopy parked near the curb, empty but with its engine running.

"You hear me, Murphy?" he yelled.

I said, "Yes, sir."

We were the first to reach the address. A woman was on the porch, looking scared.

"Officer," she said, "it was terrible! Horrible! He was right there in the bedroom—"

"Who was?" Pratt asked.

"The cat burglar!" she cried. "The one that was in the paper today! He had my husband's wallet and—"

Over her shoulder I could see the inspector's face. It was so red the whole porch glowed.

That was no place for Murphy. "Maybe he's still around," I said. "I'll see."

I jumped off the porch and scooted into the yard.

The cat burglar!

Patrolman Murphy, nuts. Convict Murphy before Pratt got through with me now.

In the yard, I went over a fence and out to the street again. Sure, the jalopy was still there, its engine still running. I reached in and cut the ignition and pocketed the keys. He wouldn't get away in this car, at least. With half a break we'd corner him.

So what? What good would it do now, Murphy, boy?

Headlights turned a corner ahead of me, and a district car came along. Car 89. I flagged it down and another one came around the same corner—car 88.

"What's this?" I asked the drivers. "Follow the leader?"

"We're answering a Code 39," one of them replied, "and we've got to use this street. It's the only way in."

He was right. The bluff runs into the river there, with 23rd Street a dead end at the top of the triangle and the cemetery at the bottom.

The cemetery?

I was afraid to open my mouth.

The cemetery and the cat burglar. And me standing there by his jalopy.

Well, why not. Murphy? You're cooked, anyway. Why not?

"Look," I said to the two drivers, "you go to East River Drive, both of you, and park there, with your blinkers on. Stop all the other district cars you see, except the lieutenant's, and park them the same way, along East River Drive. Got it?"

"What kind of a gag is this?" the first driver asked.

I didn't have time to explain. "It's orders."

He hesitated. "I dunno—"

Well, Pratt could get away with it, why not Murphy? I pointed to my

chevrons. "Do you know what these stand for?"

"Okay, Sergeant," he said. "Okay, okay."

They drove off.

I STOOD there beside the jalopy, its keys in my pocket, for maybe five minutes. That was enough, I figured.

Then I scooted back to the house that had been burglarized. I hadn't seen a thing and I hadn't heard a thing. But the cat burglar'd had a chance to see me and to know he'd better duck out on foot, without his jalopy.

The inspector was still on the porch. I picked up the mike in our car.

"This is Sergeant Murphy," I said. "Call Car 90 and tell him to take the same station he had last night. We're going to catch that cat burglar."

For an instant the dispatcher was quiet. Then he said, "Sergeant Murphy, repeat, please."

So I repeated.

"Sergeant Murphy, those orders will have to be—"

"Those are Inspector Pratt's orders," I said.

I hung up the mike and walked away. Even if he didn't put it out, Flannigan would have heard me.

On the porch, Pratt had got all the information he could from the woman and was ready to leave.

"He got away, sir," I said. "Not a sign."

Pratt glared at me and climbed into the car.

We drove over to East River Drive and back toward town. For once, the inspector didn't ask where I was going. He was busy scribbling in his notebook.

After a minute, he said, "Murphy, what's your badge number?"

The slob! He knew it as well as I did, but I told him, anyway.

"Attached to headquarters," he said. "That right?"

I cut into the cemetery lane and doused the lights. The car bounced and swayed.

"Murphy!" he yelled. "What—where are you going?"

I didn't answer.

"What are you trying to pull? Murphy!"

"Inspector," I said, "there's something up here you ought to know about."

Then the pink glare of the neon cat lighted up the place, and we saw car 90 in the very same spot, dark, its left door wide open.

"He's asleep again!" Pratt bellowed.

I stopped, without nudging car 90 this time. The inspector was out and running before I could cut the ignition.

But car 90 was empty.

The inspector peered around, stepped toward the front of the car.

We both saw Flannigan at the same time. He'd been crouching beside his front bumper. He rose from his crouch and dived, hitting Pratt below the knees, and they rolled in the dust together.

A SHOT rang out and pinged against the fender of Flannigan's car. I hit the deck beside the others.

Pratt was the first to move. He sat up, dusted off his coat and bellowed, "By heaven, what's going on here?"

"It's the cat burglar, sir," Flannigan answered. "I'm sorry I knocked you down, sir, but I saw him aiming and I wasn't sure I could hit him at this distance."

Pratt said, "The cat burglar?"

"Sure," Flannigan replied. "He finally walked into our trap. You see, sir, we bottle up the district when he hits, and we knew that sooner or later, he'd have to come down through the cemetery."

Every time? Well, we'd done it this time, anyway.

Again Pratt said, "The cat burglar?" Then he got up. "What are you waiting for?" he roared. "He's going to get away!"

He walked right into the cemetery, standing up straight.

"You!" he yelled. "You!"

He really roared. The ground shook. The neon cat turned green.

"You!" he hollered again. "Come out with your hands up, or I'll go in and get you!"

Nobody answered. Nobody moved ahead of us.

The inspector walked on. "Stand up and surrender!" he yelled.

Flannigan and I followed him. What else could we do?

Then, just as I was expecting another

shot, we saw a shadow behind a tombstone, hands raised.

"Don't shoot!" it yelled. "Don't shoot! I quit!"

Sure and we slapped the handcuffs on him mighty fast. While Flannigan frisked him, I looked around. About ten yards off I found his gun, where he had thrown it, and ten yards further, a billfold. It was empty of money but it still held the personal papers of the man who'd been burglarized on 23rd Street.

That was it. I showed the wallet to the inspector; he looked at the papers and then gave it to Flannigan.

"He's your prisoner, Officer," Pratt said. "Take him in."

We drove back to headquarters, and Pratt didn't say a word. Nary a word. He sat in the back and tore up his notes and puffed out his smoke screen.

Sure, it came through finally, about a week later while I was wondering why it took so long. Flannigan, Joseph, Patrolman, promoted to detective and transferred to headquarters.

I was still feeling mighty proud of the way things had worked out when Sally dropped in a couple of days later.

"And when's the happy hour?" I asked her.

"Next month," she said. "Isn't that wonderful? It was a dirty trick I had to play on Daddy but he deserved it."

I was sniffing a rat again. "What do you mean, you had to play?"

"I just reminded him that a certain blond witness might forget her testimony against the safecrackers if he didn't come through."

I said, "No! The fat slob! After we caught the cat burglar and everything, he still held out!"

Sally patted me on the back. "Murphy," she said, "you did grand. Flannigan told us all about it, and you were wonderful. But that wasn't any cat burglar you caught."

"It wasn't?"

"No, it wasn't, Murphy. They took his fingerprints and they found out he'd been released from the pen the day before you caught him. He wasn't the cat burglar."

So he wasn't.

They had a fine wedding, anyway.



A Novel by FREDRIC BROWN

The GHOST



BREAKERS

With a killer and a sexy medium around, George has plenty to excite him in that haunted house—without any walking corpses!

I

IT WAS utterly silly for me to feel like that—getting prickles along my spine because it was just after dark, and I was going into an empty house and stay there. A-l by myself, in the nasty dark.

"You dope, George Rice," I thought. I stopped at the gate and took a look around at the neighborhood. It wasn't much of a neighborhood. Just old houses and all dark. If they were occupied, people went to bed early out here.

I took another gander at the house and didn't particularly like it. It had a

mottled, leprous look, because the dim light from the street lamp on the corner passed through the bars, and dead trees in the front yard made stripes and blotches of shadow.

Before I went into the house, I made a round trip of the outside. I found that the back door was closed and locked, and all the windows were closed. There wasn't any garage or shed out back. Just a high wooden fence at the alley edge of the back yard.

Inside, there was a hallway leading back to a staircase, and just before the



staircase were doorways opening to rooms on either side.

The doorway on the left was a double one, with an old-fashioned sliding door, now shoved back into the wall.

I took a look around that room first, because that was the one in which I was to spend the night.

It was just an empty room as far as I could see.

I looked around the rest of the house and didn't see anything out of the way. Just eight empty rooms. There was a door that looked as if it might lead up to an attic, but it was locked, and my key didn't fit. Well, my instructions hadn't been to search the house, anyway—just to spend the night in it, downstairs.

I went back down and got set for my vigil. I'd had sense enough to bring a newspaper to sit on, so I spread it out on the bare floor and sat down. I turned off my flashlight, because the batteries wouldn't last if I kept it going all night.

I sat there for an hour, and nothing happened.

EVERY once in a while a train went by along the tracks just beyond the alley, and the whole house shook.

Another hour went by, and I was almost beginning to hope something *would* happen. This was an easy way to earn twenty bucks, but if I ever took another assignment like this, I thought, I would bring a thermos bottle of java, extra flashlight batteries, and a good book. Or a blonde.

I stood up and yawned.

Then, with startling suddenness, there was a sound as if the house were falling down. It wasn't a train this time. It was a noise that came from the stairs.

Yanking the flashlight out of my pocket, I flicked it on and threw its beam through the big double doorway. I must have been pretty quick, because the guy was still falling when I got the light on him.

He ended up with his head on the floor of the hallway and his feet still on the bottom step of the stairs and lay there, limp and quiet, as though he were dead.

He was dead, all right, because when I got there and put my hand where his heart ought to be beating, it wasn't. If

that final crack I'd heard had been his head hitting against the floor, there wasn't any wonder about that.

There was a strong smell of cheap whiskey, the kind that's peddled around the jungles for two bits a pint. And the jungles was where he'd come from—there wasn't much doubt about that. His clothes were worn and dirty misfits, and his grayish hair was matted and unkempt. One side of his face was ugly and swollen with a bruise that couldn't have come from this fall. Aside from that, his face was pasty gray. Obviously, a bum.

But a corpse is a corpse, the law being no respecter of persons, and I'd have to notify the police about this one. I wasn't feeling any too cheerful as I went out and walked to the drugstore that I'd passed on my way to the house. Death is death, even if it's only a drunken bum who's killed himself.

Anyway, I thought, maybe I'd found the answer to the haunted house angle. If tramps used it as a boarding house, that might account for the noises and lights—if it was on a basis of noises and lights that this house had got its reputation. Pollock hadn't told me.

"I'd rather, Rice," he'd said, "that you went there without any preconceptions. Imaginative people sometimes see what is not there."

"I'm not imaginative, Mr. Pollock," I'd cut in.

He had smiled. "Even unimaginative people sometimes tend to see and hear things they expect to see and hear—you understand?"

"I see what you mean," I told him, "but I don't agree. In my own case, I mean. A private detective doesn't do any dreaming."

"Even a private detective, Rice. I've talked this over with Mr. Wegs, our chairman, and he agrees. Anyway, what have you to gain by knowing what to expect tonight in the way of—uh—manifestations?"

"Nothing," I'd admitted.

The drugstore was just closing as I got there, but the druggist let me in to use the phone. After I'd made the call, I started back the six or seven blocks to the house.

The nearest squad car would be noti-

fied by radio, I figured, and if it was in the neighborhood, it would probably be there before I got back.

It was. There was a police car parked in front. Blocks away, I heard the siren of the police ambulance coming. Inside the house, I could see flashlights moving around, one upstairs and one downstairs.

The man upstairs must have heard my footsteps, for he threw up a window and leaned out, throwing the beam of his flashlight on me as I walked through the gate.

"George Rice," he called out. His face was in the shadow, but the voice was that of Sergeant Carey. "What the devil you doing here?"

"I put in the call, Sarge," I called back. "I saw the guy fall down the stairs."

"What guy?" he asked.

FROM the tone of his voice I knew he wasn't ribbing me, but just the same I went on into the house on the double. The body wasn't there.

Sergeant Carey came downstairs with a funny look on his face, and another copper—one I didn't know—showed up from the room I'd been sitting in up to a half hour, or less, ago.

"He was lying right there!" I said and pointed out the spot. "And I saw him fall. Or anyway, I saw him land."

"Sure he was dead?" asked the copper I didn't know.

"Sure I'm sure," I said. "His heart wasn't beating. He looked dead. Sure he was."

Carey was still looking at me with that goofy expression.

"You wouldn't be kidding us, would you, George?" he said.

"Heck, no," I said.

"I suppose you had business here?"

I nodded. "And my client had permission from the owner of the house for me to use it. I had a key." I showed it to him.

The ambulance was stopping out in front.

"Walt," Carey said to the other policeman, "go tell 'em it's a false alarm." Then he said to me, "George, you'll have to go down to headquarters with us to make a report of this. And it ain't going

to do your rep any good. What were you looking for here tonight?"

"Ghosts, Sarge," I told him.

His eyes narrowed a little. "If you know this joint is haunted," he said, "didn't you know that the ghost is supposed to be that of a tramp who fell downstairs here fifteen years ago?"

"No, I didn't know that," I said. "All right, so we'll go in to headquarters. But first, is it okay if I take another look around this place, inside and out?"

"Sure. Take your time, and we'll help you."

I heard the ambulance drive away, and the cop named Walter came back in. We went over the house thoroughly, even going up into the attic this time, as Carey had a skeleton key that opened the door.

We looked outside in the yard and a block each way in the alley. Then I went back again and checked on whether the windows could be opened from the outside. Several of them could be. A tramp could have got in easily enough. Getting out would have been easier, for I hadn't locked the front door when I went to phone.

We got into the squad car and drove downtown.

Of course, Captain Nelson was on duty. That was my luck. I'd tangled with Nelson before, and he was going to make the most of this.

He was grinning before Carey got halfway through his story. Then he wiped off the grin and glowered at me, pretending he wasn't enjoying it.

"What's your side of it, Rice?" he said.

I told him. I'll admit it sounded rather incredible here at headquarters.

"And just what were you doing there?" he asked.

"I don't think my client will have any objection to my telling," I said, "but can I phone him first? I'd like to be sure."

HE NODDED, and I went out into the hall where there was a phone booth. I looked up Pollock's home number and called it. He sounded sleepy and annoyed when he answered, but when I told him the story, he was wide awake, all right.

"Sure," he said, "tell the police any-

thing they want to know. Then come on around here. I'll wait up."

I went back into Captain Nelson's office.

"It's okay," I told him. "I was hired by the Psychic Research Society. Or, by Mr. Norman Pollock, acting for the society. I was to spend the night in that house—2134 Greene Street—and report on anything that happened—if anything did."

Nelson chuckled. "And you say Pollock didn't tell you the history of the house?"

"No. He told me I'd be less likely to imagine things if I didn't know the details. I gathered from Pollock that he hadn't considered this much of a job in itself, but he put me on it as a test of my nerve—or nerves. He had other work in mind."

"What kind of other work?"

"The society—I hear it was organized recently to do a lot of investigating—mediums and reported phenomena of any sort. They expect to use a private detective. Me, I hope. Pollock said they needed a man who wasn't afraid of ghosts and bogies—who wasn't superstitious. I'm not and I didn't see a ghost tonight. A tramp *did* fall down those stairs. The only answer is that I was mistaken in thinking he was dead."

"Can't you tell whether a guy's dead or not?"

"I thought I could. Come to think of it, I still think he was dead."

"Give us a description of the guy. We'll make a check of the hospitals and the morgue, just in case."

I gave him as good a description as I could. Nelson jotted it down. Feeling like a fool, I made my escape.

II

FORTUNATELY, Mr. Pollock's place was only a dozen blocks from headquarters, so I walked.

He had turned on the porch light and must have heard my footsteps, for he opened the door for me before I reached it. He led me into a small room, obviously a den.

"Sit down, Rice," he said and picked up a decanter. "Like a highball strong or medium?"

"Sorry," I told him, "but when I'm working, I never drink."

"Admirable sentiment, my boy. But let's consider that you're through working for now. Wouldn't it be rather anticlimactic for you to go back there tonight?"

I grinned. "All right, but don't make it too strong. I am going back there after we've finished talking. I want to look around again and take my time at it."

"What would you expect to find?"

"I don't know, Mr. Pollock." I took the drink he handed me and sipped it appreciatively. "But I'm going to look through the house thoroughly and I'm going to walk a bit both ways along the tracks, particularly toward the yards. That fellow went somewhere."

"Are you sure?"

"Am I sure? Oh, I see what you mean. Yes, I'm sure. I don't believe in the supernatural."

"You gave me only the rough story over the phone," he said. "Tell me everything that happened, from the time you entered the house."

I did, talking slowly, trying to remember every little detail as well as I could.

When I finished, he asked, "Was a train going by at the time you heard his fall?"

I thought a minute. "I believe one had just gone by, but the sound had died away by the time he fell. The noise was startling and it came out of a silence."

"Then he could have entered and gone upstairs while that train was passing, and you wouldn't have heard."

"I wouldn't have heard unless he'd been pretty noisy about it. The tracks are just back of the house, and the whole place shook whenever a train passed."

"But if he'd walked around upstairs just before he actually fell, you'd have heard that. The train had gone on. He must have stood still there at the head of the stairs, for a minute or two. At any rate, during the time between the train's passing and the—uh—dying away of the sound."

I nodded. "That seems in line," I said. "He was undoubtedly drunk, possibly ill, as well. After negotiating the stairs, he could have stood a minute at the top, feeling dizzy or faint, unable to go on,

and then fallen."

"Exactly. But now the more serious difficulty. Your—uh—diagnosis of death. How sure were you?"

"I was plenty sure," I said. "I put my hand inside his shirt to find out whether his heart was beating."

"Was the skin warm or cold to the touch?"

"I don't know. I didn't touch his skin. He was wearing a slip-over undershirt, so I didn't try to get my hand inside it. But I held my hand right over where his heart should have been beating and I held it there long enough to be sure."

"You don't concede that you might have made a mistake? After all, you were startled. From his appearance and from the way he lay, you probably assumed he was dead. And the beating of a man's heart, particularly a faint beating, isn't something that thumps his chest up and down. It could be missed, especially if one didn't expect to find it."

The doorbell rang. Pollock stood up.

"I forgot to tell you," he said. "I phoned Zenas Wegs and waked him, too. He said he'd drop around. Please excuse me."

I groaned mentally at the thought of going over the whole story again. First, Carey, then Nelson, then Pollock, and now Wegs.

BUT I didn't really mind so much, because I was glad of the chance to meet Wegs. He was the head of the Psychic Research group, and although Pollock had hired me tentatively, he had given me to understand that whether or not I got the real job—a permanent assignment—depended on how their chairman, Zenas Wegs, liked my work. Mr. Wegs' opinion of me would make the difference between twenty bucks for one night's work or a lot of twenties from now on.

The Psychic Research Society, you see, wasn't a penny-ante outfit. It had only a dozen or so members and only half that many active ones. But the members, mostly, were prominent business men who could afford to gild their hobbyhorse.

Wegs was an attorney; Pollock was the owner of a department store. Stanton Waldo was an oil millionaire who,

I'd heard, had been made a sucker of by several fake mystics and who had recanted his superstitions and was now helping expose as many fakers as he could find.

Those three I knew of, and one other, who wasn't a business man. You've probably heard of Scollini, who rated next to Thurston in his heyday. Scollini was retired now, but he still interested himself in exposing mediums and duplicating their tricks, in the Houdini tradition.

Pollock came back with Wegs, a big, slow-moving man, who looked stupid until you caught his eyes. Pollock introduced us, and Wegs held out his hand.

"I suppose Norman has pumped you dry, but can you stand telling it again?"

I grinned. "My time is yours. You're paying for it."

I let Pollock talk me into having a second drink before I began. The story was easier to tell this time. Practice had made me perfect.

It was three o'clock by the time they got through with me.

Wegs had come in his car and when he learned that I intended to go back to the house on Green Street, he dropped me off there on his way home. He asked me to report to him at his office whether or not I found anything of interest.

I went through the house and the yard with a fine-tooth comb and didn't find a thing. That struck me, before I'd finished the search, as being odd in more ways than one.

I mean that I had assumed, from the presence of the tramp, that tramps had known the house was empty and had used it. But certainly they would have left some traces, and there were none.

It was getting light in the east by the time I finished. I went out into the alley, had a fruitless look from one end of it to the other, and then climbed over the wire fence that separated the alley from the railroad property.

I walked on into the jungles. I saw a few tramps cooking their breakfast around a common fire. None of them even remotely resembled the man I had seen last night. I walked around the end of a string of reefers and there, sitting on the coupling of the last one, was Shorty.

Shorty was a panhandler who had been around town longer than I had and who knew the underside of it better than he knew the palm of his hand. His eyes lighted up when he saw me and he waved.

"Say, Mr. Rice," he said, "can you spare a dime?"

"Sure," I said. I handed him a buck. "Shorty, I'm looking for a guy. Just for information. He isn't wanted." And I gave the best description I could.

Shorty thought a minute, and then shook his head.

"Didn't see a guy like that."

"Shorty," I said, "there's a house just north of the tracks, about six blocks out that way." I described it.

"Sure," he said. "That joint's haunted. What about it?"

"Any tramps ever go there?"

His eyes got wide. "You kidding me, Mr. Rice? Criminety, no bo would go any nearer that place than the tracks."

"Okay, Shorty. Listen, if you see the guy I described, drop around and let me know. It's worth a sawbuck if you do."

Shorty would keep an eye out for a gray-haired tramp with a bruised face, all right. A sawbuck would be a fortune for Shorty.

I WENT home and slept till noon, and then waked myself up with a cold shower. I decided to stop in at my own office before going to see Zenas Wegs. Not that there was likely to be anything of importance awaiting me there, but there might be something.

The office, incidentally, is only half mine, although my name is the only one on the door, and I pay all the rent. The explanation is Jan Sharpe. Jan Sharpe is a screwball.

I had known Jan for a long time, and we liked each other, maybe because we were pretty much opposites. Jan's a mystic and writes books about it. I don't mean he claims to be a medium or gazes into crystals. But it's his hobby, and he has a small income, so it doesn't matter if most of his books aren't published and if the ones that do see print don't sell many copies.

Jan had suggested that the desk in my outer office would be an ideally secluded spot for him to do his writing, and in

exchange for the use of it, he would answer my telephone and make a noise like a secretary. That suited me fine.

It suited him fine too. He was right about it being a secluded spot. He had been answering an average of one phone call a day, which isn't heavy labor to exchange for the use of an office to write in.

But my first real break, just yesterday, had come through Jan. He knew a few members of the society and when he had learned that they intended to use professional help in their investigations, he had recommended me and talked Pollock into giving me a crack at the job.

Jan looked up when I walked into the office, beaming at me through his thick spectacles.

"I've been hoping you'd come in, George," he said. "Tell me about it."

"How much did Pollock tell you?" I asked.

"Pollock? I haven't seen Pollock. All I know is what was in the newspapers."

I stood there, stunned, for a minute. The newspapers! I hadn't thought of the newspapers and what they would do with a story like last night's.

But where had they got it? Surely, Pollock or Wegs wouldn't have given it to them. The Psychic Research Society didn't go in for publicity and surely they wouldn't give the papers a half-baked, unproved story like that.

Then I remembered the way Captain Nelson had grinned, and I had all the answer I needed.

I groaned.

I saw the papers laying on Jan's desk and grabbed for them. Both morning papers and the city edition, which comes out at noon, of one of the afternoon sheets.

I didn't have to hunt for it in any of them. Editors' minds must run in similar channels, for it was a boxed story on the front page of each of them.

One of them was headed:

DETECTIVE VERSUS GHOST

Another exploited:

MYSTERY OF THE VANISHING CORPSE

The third headline said:

SHAMUS STALKS SPECTER

"Tell me all," Jan begged, and I said,
"Shut up, Jan."

THE boys had really gone to town on that story. It was a howl, the way they told it. A howl, that is, to everybody but me. From now on, maybe the Psychic Research bunch would use my services, but nobody else in his right mind would.

"Let me at that phone, Jan," I said. I called the morgue and the four hospitals that took emergency cases and I drew five blanks. No tramps or bums brought in, drunk or injured, or both. Another call told me that he hadn't been

or do I go to his home?"

"His home. Listen, George, about this manifestation. Can you tell me about it?"

"All right," I gave in. "I'll tell you. But let's eat while we talk. I haven't had breakfast, and you say you haven't had lunch."

So, over eggs and coffee, I had to tell the story once more.

III

AN HOUR later, at Wegs' office, his secretary told me to go right in. Zenas



IT'S ONLY MONEY

THE LEGAL GOINGS-ON which occur after a man is put behind bars can cost a considerable amount of folding stuff, as is evidenced by the famous Sacco and Vanzetti case which took place in Boston. Although it is still a popular parlor game to argue about whether they were guilty or otherwise—and the evidence indicates otherwise—the fact remains that it was one of the most expensive murder trials of modern times.

Between May, 1921, when the trial began and August, 1927, when the two men were executed, their defense committee spent approximately \$325,000. In addition, it is estimated that millions of dollars were paid to plead clemency via newspaper space, special petitions to the government, and mass meetings by the public at large.

—Manley E. David

vagged. Nobody with a bruised face had been picked up on any charge.

"There was a call for you," Jan said. "Stanton Waldo wants to see you this afternoon."

I whistled. "The oil millionaire! Don't tell me—Had he read the papers?"

"I suppose so," Jan said. "He's a member of the society and he'd be interested. More interested than most of them because he's less skeptical than most."

"You know him, Jan?"

"Not me, George. I don't move in such exalted circles. I know Pollock and Wegs and Scollini, and that's all. But I made an appointment for you to see Waldo at four o'clock. Is that okay?"

"Sure," I said. "Has he got an office,

Wegs frowned when he saw me. He shook hands with all the cheerfulness of an undertaker.

"Rice," he said, "I'm afraid we won't be able to use you any more. Not for a long time, anyway."

I didn't quite get it.

"I'm sorry if you don't like my work, Mr. Wegs."

"It's not your work, at all, Mr. Rice. It's the publicity. You've seen the papers, haven't you? Our group doesn't like publicity at all, and publicity of that kind, well—"

"Oh," I said.

"It ties up with us. We want whatever investigator we use to remain undercover and not be known as a detective

working for us. I'm sorry it happened. It's partly my fault, I'll admit. If it had occurred to me, we might have stopped that story. But you didn't tell us you had seen any reporter."

"I didn't. But I should have guessed that Captain Nelson would give them the story."

I stopped, because there wasn't any use in crying over spilled milk or belly-aching over what a heel Nelson had been.

"Maybe a few months from now," Wegs said, "when this has blown over, we'll be able to throw some work your way. Incidentally, you can bill us for two days instead of one. Pollock wants to talk to you again, and Stanton Waldo wants to get the story from you first-hand, too." He smiled. "So it's only fair, since we're taking up your full time today, practically, for us to pay you for it."

I said, "Thanks," because twenty bucks is twenty bucks and it would pay the office rent for another two weeks.

I told him about my talk with Shorty and about my search of the Greene Street house. Finally, I stood up to leave, and then thought of something.

"By the way," I said, "if Shorty does find out who that fellow was—I mean, if I can prove to the police that I wasn't seeing things and that a man really did fall down those stairs, does that change the picture any?"

He thought it over a minute.

"I believe it would—partially, at least. I'll promise that the newspapers will eat the words of those stories they printed today, and that will put you and the society in quite a different light."

After I left Wegs' office, I phoned Pollock and made an evening appointment. Then I took the carline out to the expensive suburb where Stanton Waldo's home was located.

I had thought butlers existed only in the movies, but a real butler let me into the Waldo mansion and took my hat.

"Mr. Waldo's expecting you," he said. "He's in—"

But Waldo beat him to it by popping out of a doorway down the hall, much as a mouse would pop out of a hole. He looked like a mouse, too. I don't know just why. It wasn't his size, for he was

of average height and build. Maybe it was because of his eyes. They were small and shiny, like shoe buttons. And his manner was quick and furtive, fearful.

"You George Rice?" he said. "My study's here. Come on in."

He pulled up a chair for me with jerky movements, and then sat down on the edge of the desk.

"Pollock told me about your experience, Rice," he said. "I know the facts about it. I want your opinion."

"My opinion about what?"

"The significance of what happened, of course. Was it or was it not a psychic experience?"

"It was not," I said.

"But how can you be so sure?"

"Because," I told him, "I don't believe in psychic experiences. There is a possible physical explanation, so I accept it."

"So you're a skeptic," he said. "Would you care to earn five hundred dollars, Rice?"

I admitted that I would.

"It's worth that to me to know what really happened last night. If you can prove one way or the other what happened, I'll pay you that."

I LOOKED at him curiously. Five hundred bucks is a lot of money to pay out just to satisfy your curiosity. Then I remembered it wasn't much for him. Five hundred dollars meant as much to Waldo as five cents meant to me, and I'd sure give a nickel myself for that information.

I grinned at him. "I'll try," I said, "but it doesn't seem too good a chance. If that tramp's still in town, I might find him, but if he took the next freight out, then I haven't much hope. I take it that producing the gentleman in question would constitute proof."

"Adequate proof, yes, if your experience was a physical one."

"And if it wasn't—I'm just asking out of curiosity, because I can't believe that it wasn't—how the devil would I prove it? Bring the ghost here?"

He smiled, but I couldn't tell whether there was humor in the smile or not.

"I imagine that the fact that you wouldn't be able to bring it would prove

the fact to you," he said.

"You're suggesting that I repeat my stay at the house and see if somebody falls down the stairs again? Um—and if the same guy falls down again, I could sit on his chest and yell for help instead of leaving him. If he vanishes out from under me, he's a ghost. That the idea?"

"It sounds absurd when you put it that way, I'll admit."

"And if I became convinced, through another experience, that it was a ghost, you'd take my word for it?"

"I would. I took the trouble to investigate you, Mr. Rice, before I phoned your office. I'm convinced that you are honest and sincere. I hope you'll forgive me for investigating you."

I laughed. "Detectives are so used to investigating other people that it wouldn't occur to one to feel hurt because someone investigated him. Fewer con men would make fortunes if investigations were more common."

"Exactly," said Waldo. "I—uh—must admit that I have been victimized myself in the past. Several mystics from whom I have taken advice turned out not to be disinterested. By the way, is the society going to use you in further investigations of Irene Steiner?"

"Who is Irene Steiner?"

"A most remarkable medium and a—uh—extremely attractive one. Norman Pollock found her. Incidentally, something she told me makes me particularly interested in what happened last night."

"Something she told you? What?"

"Several days ago she told me that an experience someone else was going to have would have a profound effect on my life."

I didn't get it. I just looked at him.

"Don't you see? Frankly, I have been wavering in my belief in the supernatural. It is difficult fully to credit phenomena in seances. But an unusual experience like yours—it would weigh a lot with me to be convinced beyond doubt that you really saw an apparition."

Sucker, I thought. No wonder Waldo had been victimized if he was as gullible as all that. A vague statement—"an experience someone else is going to have soon will have a profound effect on your life." Anything could be made to fit a

vague prediction like that.

I went downtown, phoned the hospitals and morgue again—without luck—and then went to Norman Pollock's place to keep my appointment.

Pollock, it turned out, merely wanted a full account of what I had done after I left his house the night before, and most of what I told him was just a repetition of my talk with Waldo.

I didn't leave Pollock until eleven. I let him think I was going home. I thought that the fewer people who knew I was going back to the house on Greene Street, the better.

I got there, and there was the house with its scabrous front of peeling gray paint, further mottled by the tree's shadow. A dead house and a dead tree.

I hesitated with one foot on the first step of the porch steps when I remembered that I hadn't brought a flashlight with me.

NOTHING was going to happen here tonight, I told myself, so why go in at all? Why not go home and catch up on sleep?

At any rate, I told myself, I wouldn't accomplish anything here tonight. I wouldn't be able to search the place and I would be at a disadvantage if anything did happen. But what could happen, unless another manifestation of the supernatural?

"Another?" I asked myself. "What do you mean, you dope, by another?"

In spite of calling myself names, I was a bit afraid to go in.

That's why I went. It doesn't do to give way to yourself in something like that. If you give in once, you're sunk.

The door wasn't locked. I didn't need the key, which was still in my pocket. I tiptoed down the hall toward the stairs. Don't ask me why I tiptoed. It was not because I thought anyone was there. If anyone had been there, they would have heard me, anyway.

I got to the foot of the stairs, and a voice said:

"Hello, George."

"Jan!" I exclaimed. "What the devil are you doing here?"

He laughed in the darkness.

"I had a hunch you'd show up here."

"Jan," I said, "I didn't know I was

coming here myself until late this afternoon. What made you so darn sure I'd come?"

"Don't talk so loud, George. Come in here and sit down. Matter of fact, we mustn't talk at all, after a while. Silence is almost as important as darkness. I'm hoping there will be a manifestation tonight."

"Rats!" I said. "There aren't any—Oh, skip it!"

A haunted house isn't the place to get into an argument about haunted houses, I thought.

"But you didn't answer my question," I said. "What made you think I'd come here?"

"Just a hunch," said Jan. "I didn't come here to meet you, George. I'm expecting other company."

"Other company?" I echoed blankly. For an instant I thought he meant the ghost.

"Scollini," said Jan, as though that explained everything.

"The magician?"

"Yes. Have you met him yet?"

"No," I said. "The Psychic Research members I've met thus far are Pollock, Wegs, and Stanton Waldo."

"Scollini's smarter," said Jan. "Pollock and Wegs aren't fools, but Scollini has methods which they lack. He knows the tricks of the trade inside out. He's exposed dozens of mediums."

"The devil you say. You admire him for that when you say you believe in mediums?"

"Don't be an ass, George. Because I believe in psychic phenomena doesn't mean I believe in fake mediums as well as real ones. And there are probably a hundred fakes to every known genuine one."

"By the way," I said, "if Scollini is coming here, how'd you know I wasn't he?"

Jan laughed.

"Because of the noise you made tip-toeing around. Scollini would either walk openly, or I wouldn't have heard him at all. He said he'd be late."

Then, as abruptly as it had happened last night, the house fell down again—or seemed to! *Bump—thud—bump—bang!*

IV

SOMETHING was falling down the stairs. I jumped up and I heard Jan gasp and get to his feet, too.

"Have you got a flash?" I asked.

But by that time Jan had it on, and its spot, feebler than the bright light I'd the night before, shone through the double doorway and on the thing that lay at the foot of the stairs.

It was a body! Again!

I ran toward it, and so did Jan. Then, a yard away from it, I put out my hand to stop Jan.

"Wait," I said. "That's not a man—that's a wax figure!"

There was a chuckle from down the hall.

"Your eyesight is very good, my young friend," said a voice that was not Jan's.

Jan turned the flashlight that way.

"Hello, Scollini," he said.

I'd have taken him for the devil, myself. He had the face and the build for it, as well as the voice and the clothes. A black top-hat and black magician's cape. He was tall and slender and had a long, thin face with a pointed chin. There was a devilish grin on his face. He stood so straight that you didn't realize he was old until you noticed that his hair was pure white.

"And you're George Rice, then?" he said. "Waldo told me you'd be here, so I came along."

"Just a minute," I said. "This dummy never fell down the stairs. The wax would have cracked."

He chuckled again. "Jan was right about you, Rice. You do think quickly. No, it didn't fall down the stairs. I placed it there. The sound of the fall is a recorded sound effect. I played it on a portable phonograph around the corner."

"But why?" I wanted to know. "What's it all about?"

He strolled forward toward us, and I noticed that the thick crepe-rubber soles of his shoes made no sound at all.

"To eliminate a possibility, Mr. Rice I hope you'll forgive me. But I wanted to be sure that no one had played a practical joke on you last night."

"It wasn't any dummy I saw and touched last night if that's what you

mean," I said.

"That's what I meant, and I believe you now. Not only did you spot the deception before you came within reach of it, but you kept your head enough to realize that, being wax, it could not have fallen and remained intact."

"Anyone would have thought of that, wouldn't they?"

"Later, yes. Not at once. Was your flashlight in good condition?"

"Brighter than Jan's," I said. "Do you know any reason why someone would have wanted to—uh—impose on me in that particular way last night?"

I thought he hesitated before he shook his head.

We watched while Scollini moved the dummy out of the hallway. Then, using a bright flashlight of his own, he bent over to examine the floor at the foot of the stairs. I had looked there, too, but I hadn't used a magnifying glass. Scollini did.

He said, "Ah!" finally.

I couldn't see anything there from where I stood and I bent closer. He handed me the glass and pointed to a spot.

I knelt beside him and looked. There were a few grains of a white powder. With infinite care, Scollini gathered what he could of them into a tiny glassine envelope. I asked what he thought it was.

"I don't know," he said, "but I'll guess. Talcum powder. I'll show it to a chemist tomorrow."

"Talcum powder?" I thought hard. "But tramps don't use talcum. Unless—Scollini, did the original tramp who died here have gray hair?"

The magician grinned. "He did, my boy, he did. Our minds, I see are running in the same channel."

MAYBE they did, I thought, but mine didn't run very far. If someone had wanted the tramp of last night to fit whatever description of the original one was recorded, then talcum powder could easily turn dark hair gray. But why? If Scollini had any idea about that, he was miles ahead of me.

"You think the body I found last night was made up to resemble that tramp?"

"To the extent of the hair. Yes. I've

checked into the records, and no photograph was taken of that body. I don't imagine any actual make-up was used. If it was, I think there'd be traces of grease-paint here as well as powder."

Jan came over to join us. "Scollini," he said, "did someone powder that fellow's hair, or did he do it himself?"

"We'll ask him," Scollini said.

Jan's eyes widened. "I hadn't thought of that. Scollini, that suggestion from you! I thought you didn't believe in the supernatural."

The magician chuckled. "I don't believe, Jan. But he might give us an answer anyway. What do you say to a seance at my place tomorrow night?"

"Just the three of us?" Jan asked.

"Oh, no. We'll ask any of the society members who want to come and make it a real circle. I've been promising them one, told them I'd duplicate the materialization technique Walter Crowley used to use—until I caught him at it. It will be highly educational, I assure you. You can come, Rice?"

I told him it would take a shotgun to keep me away.

Nothing more happened that night. The next day I chased down a few blind alleys, including a trip to the jungles to see Shorty, and then caught a few hours' sleep before I looked up Jan to go to Scollini's with him.

Scollini's place was a bachelor flat. He had taken all the furniture out of one room, leaving it utterly bare, except for eight plain chairs and a small table with a phonograph and a few boxes and pieces of paraphernalia in one corner.

Wegs and Waldo were there when I arrived, as was another member of the society whom I had not yet met and who was introduced to me as Harold Phelan.

Pollock was the last to arrive. A few minutes later, Scollini took the floor.

"Gentlemen," he said, "most of you were at the seance given by the medium, Crowley, at which we exposed some of his tricks. But some of you had attended previous seances of his at which I was not present. You, Mr. Waldo, in particular, wanted to know how he could have achieved certain effects at those previous seances. Tonight I'll try to duplicate them and explain them afterward."

Waldo, I saw, was sitting on the edge of his chair, all excited attention. He watched Scollini as a mouse might watch a cat.

The magician cleared his throat.

"We'll try to duplicate the procedure and precautions which I've been told you used at those seances. Two of you—let's say Waldo and Pollock—may search me and examine my clothing, while the rest of you search the room. You brought rope to tie me with, Wegs?"

Zenas Wegs nodded. "The same rope we used on Crowley."

We all went into the empty room and subdivided among us the work of examining and sealing the room. Meanwhile, Waldo and Pollock frisked Scollini.

At Scollini's instructions, we put the phonograph in a corner of the room and near it the other objects that had been on the table. I saw now that they were a speaking trumpet and tambourine.

Then the table went into the center of the room and the seven chairs in a circle about it. Wegs and Pollock then tied Scollini in the arm chair, using thin clothesline and tying his wrists tightly to the arms of the chair and his ankles to the legs.

"All but one of you sit down now," Scollini directed. "You, Pollock, start the phonograph, then turn off the light. Be sure you can find your way to the empty chair before you push the switch."

The phonograph started grinding out *Lead Kindly Light*, and the light switch clicked.

UTTER darkness. The phonograph played about a minute, then stopped abruptly as though someone had lifted off the needle. The sudden silence was almost startling.

Utter silence and utter blackness. Time seemed to have no existence in that void.

One's imagination began to play tricks. One's eyes tried to make shapes out of darker splotches of darkness. And this, I thought, is an avowedly fake seance. What must be the psychological effect of the real thing upon those who believe in it?

The phonograph started again, taking up at just the point where it had broken

off before. I heard someone whisper, "The table!" and I reached forward for it.

It wasn't where it should have been. I raised my hands, and the backs of them touched the bottom of it. It had evidently been made to levitate and seemed to be rocking.

The tambourine in the corner rattled, and the table fell, thudding against the carpet. The phonograph reached the end of *Lead Kindly Light* and stopped. Somewhere in the room a bell tinkled softly.

Again, utter silence and blackness for a while.

Then a voice. Not Scollini's voice. Oh, it must have been his, of course, but it didn't sound like it at all. It was a rough, coarse voice, with a plaintive whine in it.

"Why'd he do it to me, I ask you," it said. "Killed me, just like that. To kill a guy for nothin'."

"Who are you?" asked Waldo's voice.

"You wouldn't know my name, mister. He didn't kill me because of who I was. He just killed me. That's what gets me." The whine was stronger now. "If I'd done anything, it'd been different. Even if I'd had any dough to get bumped off for, then there'd be some reason, see?"

I was looking toward Scollini—I guess we all were—or toward the place where Scollini ought to be if he were still in the chair.

There was something white in the darkness. A white, misty substance. Something that shimmered as though it were faintly luminous. It looked vaguely like a human face—not Scollini's face.

Waldo's voice: "Can you materialize? Can you show yourself to us?"

Lord, I thought, is Stanton Waldo nuts? Can he be believing in this, despite the fact that he knows Scollini is putting on a show for us? Then I got the answer. They had probably been told to act as they had at the seances with the medium, Crowley. Waldo must have acted as an interlocutor at those seances and was taking the same part now.

"I'm tryin', mister. He killed me first, see, and then we was on the stairway to the attic. Him and me, and me dead. When a train goes by, see? And out we come."

A white shimmer that might have been a face, a shimmering blank in

which the imagination pictured features.

"And at the top of the stairs, blamed if he don't—"

Then the shimmer wasn't there any more, and the voice had stopped. My eyes strained into the darkness, and I saw, or thought I saw, a white horizontal line. A chair creaked.

Then silence and blackness again.

A minute or two; maybe three or four.

Then Jan's voice said, "Scollini?" quietly. Then, "Scollini, if you don't answer me, I'm going to turn on the lights."

There wasn't any answer. I heard Jan's chair scrape the carpet softly, and then, as Jan walked toward the switch, Waldo, Pollock, and Wegs seemingly all started to talk at the same time.

The light clicked on, blinding us for a second. Then I could see again.

Scollini was in the chair, all right, but he was dead. Strangled. A strip of white cheesecloth was pulled tightly around his throat, the ends hanging down over the back of the chair. The piece of cheesecloth, probably slightly impregnated with some luminous dye-stuff, which had been the ectoplasm of a moment ago, had been snatched out of his hand and used to garrote him.

I was the first to reach him and to snatch it away. But his breath and his heart had already stopped.

V

THE REST of that night was police and questioning.

It was almost dawn when they released us. Released us only because they could find no cause to suspect one of us more than they suspected another. Six of us, besides Scollini, had been sealed in that room. Each of the six had had equal opportunity to walk behind Scollini in the dark and strangle him with that cheesecloth, easy to see in the dark, jerked from his hand.

We were released with strict orders not to leave town. But we were not placed under bond, and I gathered that the police would be only too happy to have someone confess guilt by trying to run away.

Jan and I had breakfast together and read the morning papers.

"Jan," I said, "I'm through in this town, anyway. My best friend wouldn't hire me to find a lost dog. I won't be able to earn enough as a detective to buy red ink to keep my accounts with."

"It isn't as bad as that, George."

"It's worse," I said. "It's worse because they're right. I'm supposed to be a detective, and what do I detect? I ought to get a job as a dishwasher or a street cleaner and do some good in the world."

"Don't be a dope, George. You're too tired to think straight. Go home and get some sleep."

I went home and went to sleep. I awoke at four in the afternoon and when I had taken a shower and shaved, I felt better.

Something, too, was knocking at the door of my mind—something that made a noise like an idea. I sat quietly so that I wouldn't frighten it away. It was a million-dollar idea, maybe. The million dollars was Stanton Waldo's.

"George," I told myself, "when there's a crime, it's because of money or women, and there aren't any women in this case. But there's money. Waldo's millions, and he has several of them. Somebody might take a lot of trouble to separate him from one of them."

With that idea, things began to make some sense.

Assume that my little experience of night before last, with the vanishing corpse, had accomplished its object. What had been its results?

Stanton Waldo had told me that he had been victimized by mystics until he wasn't sure any more what was true in spiritualism and what wasn't. Also, my apparent encounter with an authenticated ghost had had a profound effect upon him. I had been sent as an impartial and skeptical observer by the impartial and skeptical Society for Psychic Research.

Why wouldn't that little play have been a fattening of the fatted calf for another slaughter? Too, a medium—one Irene Steiner, a curvaceous number with an inviting eye, as I had found out—had predicted to Waldo that something of the sort would happen.

So another effect was the increase of his faith in the eyesome Irene Steiner.

And who had "found" Irene Steiner but the man who had sent me to that haunted house?

I went quickly over to Jan's place. He was still asleep, but I dragged him out of bed. He listened.

"Pollock?" he asked. "Could be. I've heard his stores have been running in the red lately. But how would he get money from Waldo?"

"Not directly, of course. He would work through some shady stockbroker or get him interested in a promotion scheme. Look, Waldo's a natural-born sucker for spooks. Once he had faith in a medium again, she could lead him around by the nose. Especially if she had what this Steiner dame has got."

"Um," said Jan. "Will you play that record once more—and slowly?"

I SAT DOWN on the edge of his bed and went over my idea while he dressed.

"Pollock introduces Waldo to a medium named Irene Steiner," I said, "for the purpose of victimizing him through the medium's advice. But it has to be a slow build-up and with no spectacular phenomena, because if she starts throwing ectoplasm around, Scollini will be on her like a ton of bricks."

"Anyway, Waldo's wavering. That gives Pollock an idea. Suppose a duly-hired skeptical investigator for the society sees a bona fide ghost—that fulfills Irene's prediction and will have a profound effect on Waldo, all right. It'd be the turning point for him. Probably the society had been discussing investigating that house."

"You recommend me to him for work, and he sends me there. But meanwhile, earlier in the evening, he went there himself and he's upstairs in the attic stairway. Around midnight, when a train's going by, he carries the corpse to the head of the stairs, and when the noise of the train has died down, he lets it tumble down the steps."

Jan nodded slowly. "Do you think he killed some tramp just for that purpose?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "Scollini evidently figured it that way. It's possible that he obtained a corpse some other way, but Scollini might have been

right. What's a tramp's life compared with a crack at a million bucks or so? Anyway, Scollini was near enough right to get himself killed for his pains."

Jan drew in his breath slowly. "If Scollini hadn't been so dramatic about his method of revealing what he knew, he'd be alive, all right."

"Look, Jan," I said.

I handed him an evening paper I had bought on the way from my place to his. I pointed out a boxed item in the middle of the story about the Scollini murder. The heading was:

MILLIONAIRE OFFERS REWARD

The article under it, only a paragraph long, told that Stanton Waldo had offered a reward of five thousand dollars for proof that would result in the conviction of the murderer of Scollini.

"Funny wording," Jan said when he had read it.

"Not so funny," I told him, "when you consider what worries Waldo the most—not *who* killed Scollini but whether or not Scollini was killed by a human being. He offered me five hundred dollars for proof, one way or the other, whether or not it was a ghost I saw at the Greene Street house."

"Uh," said Jan. "Yes, he honestly thinks there's a possibility that spirits may have resented Scollini's mocking of them and taken him for a ride. And he'd give five grand—which means less to him than five bucks to us—to be sure about it."

"Jan," I said, "how'd you like to split that reward with me? Are you willing to take a wild chance?"

His eyes brightened. "Take a chance? Why, for half of five grand, I'd take a chance on shooting Niagara Falls in a canoe with a leaky bottom."

"Do you know where Scollini kept his props? That dummy and the portable phonograph he used night before last at the Green Street house?"

Jan nodded. "At a stage props warehouse downtown."

"Could you get them?"

"Sure. I know the man who runs the place. He'd lend them to me."

"Swell. Here's what I want you to do, Jan. Be in the Greene Street house, hid-

den, with that dummy and the phonograph that Scollini used there, at, say, eleven o'clock this evening."

"You mean you think you can get Pollock there tonight and startle him into a confession or something?"

"I can get him there," I said, "through Waldo. If he's guilty, having a ghost fall down those stairs is going to give him the screaming meemies for a moment or so, isn't it? If I jump in with both feet at the right moment, he might talk."

"It might work," said Jan thoughtfully.

"And it might not," I admitted. "But what else is a better bet? We'll be confronting him before Waldo, and his reaction may convince Waldo even if Pollock doesn't crack. I'll have Wegs there, too, for a witness."

"That's figuring the angles pretty fine, George."

"You be in that house around eleven o'clock, ready to duplicate the trick Scollini pulled. I'll take care of the rest."

WHEN I left Jan, I realized that it was too early to start pulling strings for the eleven o'clock date on Greene Street. I knew that Waldo would cancel anything else to go there with me, and Pollock and Wegs would go, too, if Waldo wanted them to. But I didn't want to give Pollock time to think about why I was getting him there.

So I killed time until a little after ten o'clock and then I phoned Waldo.

"I want to collect that five hundred dollars you offered me for proof of whether or not that business on Greene Street was genuine," I told him.

He sounded excited, all right. "Which is it, Rice?"

I stalled. "I'd rather show you. Can you meet me there, and bring Pollock and Wegs with you? They're interested, too."

"Why, yes, I can come. And I believe they will, too."

"I'll meet the three of you in front of the house in question at eleven, or as soon after as you can all get there."

"All right. I'll leave now and pick up Wegs and Pollock on my way."

I walked from downtown to Greene Street, thinking I had time to get there a few minutes early to check with Jan.

But the walk took longer than I figured it would, and Waldo's car, with the three men in it, was pulling up to the curb when I got there.

But I could count on Jan, even without a check-up. He'd had five hours since I had left his room, plenty of time to get the paraphernalia and establish himself in the house.

Again I managed to avoid answering a direct question from Waldo. I led the three of them into the house and along the hallway into the room across from the foot of the stairs. I had two flashlights with me, a bright one and one that I had doctored down to be very, very dim. The latter was in my pocket, ready for use at the right minute.

I kept the beam of my flashlight carefully away from the direction of the double doorway and the stairs beyond. Jan would be placing the dummy there now.

I was talking without saying anything.

"... and this is the room I waited in, three nights ago. It was just about this time that I got here, and of course I made a preliminary search of the house and then sat down."

I couldn't have kept it up much longer, but I didn't have to.

The crashing noise of a fall downstairs, right behind us—a familiar sound to me now, for this was the third time I had heard it and I was expecting it. But the others jumped, and I pretended to jump, too, and dropped the flashlight, flicking off the switch as I let go of it.

I pulled the dim flashlight out of my pocket and switched it on, swinging it around to play on the dummy that was laying at the foot of the stairs.

In that dim glow, it wouldn't show up as a dummy.

It wasn't one. Scollini's or any other. It was the man, the tramp, the corpse I had seen there three nights ago when this whole ghastly mess had started. The tramp whose reek of alcohol had nearly knocked me down when I had bent over him and felt for his heart beats.

The gray suit, the white hair, the huge, ugly bruise on the face—

I should have been watching Pollock's face, but I wasn't, because the corpse was moving!

It rolled over, face down, from the sprawl in which it lay, and then began crawling toward us. With awkward motions, its dead eyes wide open and staring, it crawled, foot after foot, as though in great agony.

As it crawled toward us, we all took a step backward. Waldo and I were in the center, Wegs on one side, and Pollock on the other.

For just that frozen second before it occurred to me that Jan had bettered our idea, had used Scollini's phonograph for the sound effect but had made himself up instead of using Scollini's wax figure, I was scared stiff. That idea of crawling, dragging himself toward us, was great.

Only the thing on the floor wasn't crawling toward Pollock. Zenas Wegs was backed into the far corner of the room now. The thing was crawling toward him, inexorably. Why would Jan do that?

Then I saw Wegs' face; and in it, I saw my own mistake.

The crawling corpse came nearer, and Wegs screamed in terror, kept screaming:

"Get back, curse you! You're dead—I killed—"

AND then, Jan and I were having early breakfast—or late dinner, or something—and between us, on the table, was Stanton Waldo's check for five thousand, five hundred dollars. Both rewards in one neat package.

Jan was pouring vinegar over his pancakes in the belief, soon to be abandoned, that it was syrup.

"But, George," he said, "how could I have got in touch with you to tell you? I just had to go ahead."

"I was goofy," I said. "I went off half-cocked. The reward ought to be all yours, instead of half."

"Rats. You solved the thing, only you picked the wrong guy. I'd never have figured out that motivation in a thousand

years. But after you left my place, I saw you were right, except that everything you laid to Pollock went double for Wegs."

"Sure," I said. "I can see it now. Wegs is a lawyer, handled work for Waldo direct and wouldn't have to work through a third party to milch him as Pollock would have had to do. Wegs has even less money than Pollock, so a million would look even bigger to him. Also, Wegs knew that Pollock was sending me to keep vigil at the Greene Street house that night. As head of the society, he was on the inside."

"And although Pollock was the one who introduced the medium, Irene Steiner, to the group," Jan said, "Wegs could have engineered that easily enough. If she was his confederate, the last thing he'd want to do would be to sponsor her himself."

Jan took a bite of pancake—with vinegar—and his next remarks must remain off the record.

When things had subsided, I said:

"But the thing that should have made me think again is that Pollock is under average size and not too husky. Wegs is a big guy. It took strength to carry that body upstairs, and it took strong hands to choke a man the way he choked Scollini at the seance when Scollini started to expose him."

I sighed and said again:

"Yes, Jan, I was a dope. But thanks to you, I've got half of fifty-five hundred —let's see, that's twenty-seven fifty—to back the agency. Watch my smoke from now on. Particularly with the newspapers apologizing. What are you going to do with your half?"

Jan grinned. "George," he said, "I've had more fun the last three days than in the ten years before then. If we leave that check in one chunk, could you use a partner?"

"Could I?" I said and I reached for the salt and put some into my coffee.

• • •

YOU PLAY THE DETECTIVE

(Answer to puzzle on page 51)

If John Barrows, in passing Wilson's home, had seen the latter commit suicide from the street at 7:30 P.M., the light in the room must have been turned on. Yet Barrows stated that he had turned it on when he entered the room.

?

Why did the dying bystander whisper?

IMMANUEL

by DEAN EVANS

DETECTIVE-LIEUTENANT Sammy Gomez lifted quiet brown eyes from the half moons on the fingers of his left hand as the door of homicide banged back and the large bulk of Cap-

tain Hart came through. He watched Hart fall heavily into the chair behind his own desk; watched thick fingers go through gray, sparse hair; watched as a look of half mood, half anger worked at Hart's cheeks.

"Damn it!" said Hart. "A thing like this don't do the department no good in anybody's language." He scowled hard across the office at Gomez.

Gomez waited, blinking. With his browned hands now laced on the desktop, he was a picture of the repose that



What she shouted
was wild, unclean

some women and all Latin men seem to accomplish without trying.

"Damn it," growled Hart. "Didn't you hear the latest?"

Gomez shook his head.

"The Olympic National Bank," Hart said. "Right before closing this noon!"

"Oh." Gomez flicked his eyes to the loudspeaker high on the wall above the door. "There was something," he admitted.

"Something? You ain't half said it, boy. Innocent spectator got knocked off—by our own men yet."

Gomez' eyes widened.

"Yeah. Damn it, why does it happen to us? A policeman tries to do his job and he does his best at it—and then something like this crawls down his back. The papers take ball bats to him, and just because he wears a uniform he can't open his mouth."

Gomez nodded but said nothing. What is there to say about a thing like this that hasn't been said before?

"The way it was," muttered Hart, "some guy with an old idea and a new gun walks into the bank ten minutes before closing. A few people in the place, not many. He goes to a window, let's the teller see the gun, whispers hello to him."

"Where was the bank guard?" Gomez' eyes were bright now.

"Back in the washroom. Just at that time he's gotta go and get human it seems. The teller does what the guy tells him. He gets a sack, fills it up. Then he goes back to his own cage and opens the grill and pokes the bag through. Nobody notices. There's no muss, no fuss. Yet."

"A hot day," Gomez observed.

"Yet, I said. The guy takes the bag and starts backing up. Just then somebody comes to and the big alarm bell goes off. The guy fades for a car outside."

Gomez nodded, remained silent.

"Now get this, Gomez. Going by just then is a squad car. They're wide awake so they open fire."

"Ah."

"But they don't get him. He takes off and before you can blink he's around the corner and gone, and the prowly bus is headed the wrong way. You got that?"

Gomez said nothing, but his brown eyes showed intelligence.

"One bullet," said Hart softly, "hits a citizen who just happens to be standing on the curb with his mouth open, wondering what's going on."

HART raised a big hand and brought it down hard on his desktop. "One of our own men burns the life out of an innocent bystander. How do you like that?"

Gomez sighed. "It can't be helped. The newspapers will talk, yes, but what would you? Things like that happen."

"Listen." Hart leaned forward on the desk, poked out a finger. "Listen. They burn this guy down, see. This innocent bystander." He wagged with the finger. "His name's Jose Ramirez. He's a little guy, wouldn't hardly come up to my shoulder. An insignificant mouse of a man. Lives the good life. Religious." He stopped, repeated, "Religious."

"José Ramirez," said Gomez softly, pronouncing it as it should be pronounced. "Ramírez? Auf dem Lande, ja?"

"Huh?" Captain Hart's eyes batted.

"A jest. My speaking German, that is. Religious, you said?"

"Yeah. That's the part that hurts. Watch 'em ride our spines on that. But get this. When the guy's going down he closes his eyes, and there's a sacred name on his lips."

Gomez stared, fascinated.

"A sacred name on his lips," repeated Hart. "Before the curtain falls he says twice, 'Immanuel.'"

"Immanuel?"

"Yeah. Don't it get you? Picture the poor broken bugger lying there on the concrete with one of our slugs in him. He whispers 'Immanuel' with his last breath." Hart shook his head like a dog fanning its ears. "Jeez, that gets me. The—the religion of it, Sammy!"

"Are you sure? I mean, just that one word? Just like that?" Gomez' brown eyes got puzzled, distant. "Immanuel. Immanuel?" He blinked, brought his eyes back to Hart. "It makes no sense."

"Huh?" Hart's tone was shocked. "What the hell, boy? Usually you're the one sees the human side of things. I'd think you'd be feeling like I'm feeling,

like anybody'd be feeling. Imagine the guy. I just can't get over it."

"But Immanuel?" persisted Gomez. "That's religion?"

The office was quiet. Only the occasional buzz of the electric clock on the wall over the desk and the sporadic rasping that came from the loudspeaker on that same wall disturbed the silence between the two men.

Gomez got up, went over to the door.

"Where to now?" asked Hart suspiciously.

"The lab. . . ."

THE sergeant with the thick-lensed glasses and the white smock looked up a little apologetically. "Was just about to bring it upstairs, Lieutenant. Photo boys just slipped it in to me. Homicide interested?"

Gomez picked up a glossy 8 x 10 and examined it. "This the one killed outside the bank?"

"Yeah. A young guy. Uh—Lieutenant? Sorry about that."

"What?" Gomez looked up from the photo, looked over at the other.

"I just mean—well—uh—a religious sort of a guy, they say."

Gomez' eyes tightened.

"I just mean—" The sergeant smiled a friendly little smile. "I mean—uh—he was Mexican wasn't he? A name like his?"

"So? A Mexican. So he was the first Mexican ever shot down?"

It made the sergeant redder. "All right. For all I know, people make a practice knocking them off for breakfast. I only meant—"

Gomez' lips were curling as he went through the glass-paneled doors. He took the photograph upstairs to homicide.

"A good job," he said to Captain Hart.

Hart frowned.

"Pix of the dead man," said Gomez. "Got it down in the lab. A very good job. If it were not for the lights reflecting incorrectly from his eyeballs, you'd think he was still alive, still standing there outside the bank, wondering what was going on." He stopped, smiled a little, dropped the photo on Hart's desk.

"Down there they feel like you do," he said.

Hart's mouth was a sudden grim line. "What the hell ails you, boy? Act like you ain't got the feelings of a fish. I thought I'd heard everything, but this—" He spread his big hands, palms up, on the desk.

Gomez leaned down. "One moment, Captain. This isn't strictly any of homicide's business, but there's a little something bothers me. This dead man. This José Ramirez." He paused, then said softly, "He had a record, perhaps?"

"What?" Hart nearly leaped from his chair. "What in the very blazing hell? You gone nuts?"

Gomez sighed. He straightened up, shrugged his shoulders, pulled his troubled brown eyes from the captain. He turned, went to the window and stared at the thin traffic that was moving like small, multicolored bugs toward Reno a little farther to the north.

He asked at last, "He had a wife, this man?"

"Yeah." Hart's teeth gritted. "That's another thing. The guy was married. The department had to tell his widow."

"I see." Another moment of silence. Then at last Gomez said, "I should like to visit her. I should like to have you come with me."

"Huh? Look, Sammy—I mean, the department's already taken care of that."

Gomez turned around. "Still, I should like to visit her. Will you come?"

Hart breathed heavily. He bit down on his lower lip, jerked his eyes sideways at the big electric clock on the wall.

"I don't like this, boy."

Silence. The clock buzzed with infinite patience as the moments paraded by. A hoarse rasp came abruptly from the built-in loudspeaker, abruptly died again.

"All right," Hart grunted. "Damn it, all right. But I don't like it."

"Immanuel," Gomez said quietly. "That bothers me. . . ."

PULL the bus up here, we can walk," said Hart. "It's that place on the right, three doors down. Look around, Gomez. A quiet apartment in a quiet neighborhood in a quiet section. Not too many lawns maybe, but—" he

shrugged—"clean. Quiet. Friendly. Look at the concrete wall over there where the kids probably play handball."

Gomez' brown eyes flicked. "A walk-up," he corrected mildly. "Not an apartment. A walkup where sometimes on dark nights beer bottles go through the walls like bullets. Where a woman's scream is nothing, just a scream, and no one notices. No lawns, of course, for grass doesn't grow in sand. And that concrete wall. The children throw dice up against it. Nevada shuffleboard, they call it. Was there anything else?"

Gomez got out of the car, and Hart followed. The two walked silently past the few doors to the building. It wasn't a place where you punch a button and stand on thick carpeting and wait for someone inside to press the buzzer for the downstairs door. Nevertheless, Captain Hart pulled up the belt on his pants, flicked nervous fingers at his coat. Sweat beads formed on his forehead.

"You got no heart, boy," he grunted softly. He rapped on a thin, paneled door.

She was young. In her stocking feet, she stood four feet eleven, perhaps. Her hair was black, long, with wide waves in it and blue-black highlights. Her eyes were brown, soft looking, and just now vague with something not natural.

"Mrs. Ramirez?" said Hart. "You'll have to pardon us."

The woman said, "Reporters?"

"From Police Headquarters, Mrs. Ramirez. I'm Captain Hart, and this is Lieutenant Gomez. I—" He swallowed. He turned his eyes to Gomez and glared weakly.

"We'd like to come in," said Gomez.

It was a place. People lived here. People will live most anywhere. Gomez' eyes scanned the small room. Worn furniture. A radio with peeling veneer and a half-filled wine bottle on top. A brand new television set in one corner, looking as out of place as plumbing in a log cabin.

"Police?" The woman mouthed it.

"Yeah, Mrs. Ramirez," said Hart quickly. "We just dropped in to see if there was anything we could do. I mean, in your moment of sorrow."

Something that might have been a bitter laugh came from the woman's

lips. She went to the radio, picked up the wine bottle, put it to her mouth. "Cops," she said. "Sure. Who else? All right, killers, hear it hard. The city's going to pay for this." Her smoky dark eyes flashed. "Pay—understand?"

"One moment." It was Gomez.

The woman snapped a look at him. Her tongue darted. Something in Spanish cracked like wild, unclean lightning in the small room.

"What'd she say?" asked Hart uneasily.

"She called me a name. Would you care to hear it in English?" Gomez' voice was flat.

Hart swallowed.

The woman's voice cracked sharply again. It was heat lightning this time with hate for a backdrop, and it seemed to make the air writhe. As suddenly as it began, it stopped. The woman's hands shook. Her shoulders shook, so that the wine in the bottle frothed. The only sound in the room now was an acid sobbing from somewhere deep within her.

"Jeez, let's get outa here," whispered Hart.

He led the way downstairs, went up the street to the department car, got in. He slammed the door shut.

"You and your damned ideas!" he snarled. "So we had to go up there and churn up a woman whose husband's just been shot dead by the boys in our own backyard. So we had to make ourselves big-hearted sympathy boys. Damn it! I can just see the commissioner pinning medals on us for this!"

Gomez made no answer. He slid behind the wheel, pulled out from the curb. He said softly:

"A wino."

"Holy hell! What you expect at a time like this? Cripes, Gomez, I don't get you at all! Your own people, and you act like what-the-hell."

Gomez sighed. "A drunken widow," he murmured. "And her husband said 'Immanuel,' you said...."

THE electric clock on the wall indicated three twenty-four. The door of homicide opened, and the desk sergeant stuck his head in, looked over at Gomez.

(Turn to page 126)

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"Guy outside, Lieutenant. Punk named Manera. Says you been putting out feelers on him."

Gomez nodded. "In here."

"What the devil now?" demanded Hart.

"Songbird."

"Huh?"

But the door was opening again. Manera was very dark. Very small. Thin. His eyes were all over the place at once, and his mouth was ready with alibis for the middle of next week. He looked at Hart, looked over at Gomez. His thin lips opened and half formed a leer. He said casually, almost flippantly:

"Qué es, amigo?"

Gomez didn't reply. He stared. Then he got up, went around his desk and across the room to the thin dark man. He suddenly brought up his right hand and cracked the palm hard against the dark man's cheek.

"Español, is it?" he hissed. He did it again. And again, backhand. The dark man's head snapped to the left, to the right. "We'll have English spoken here. America, remember?"

"Hey, for God's sake!" Hart's eyes were big incredulous balls.

"A songbird," said Gomez, paying no attention to Hart. He grabbed the thin dark man's lapels and shook hard as if snapping a piece of laundry before hanging it on the line.

"Dios, Dios!" The thin man's words were spewed, agonized syllables.

"A little louder," grated Gomez. "The captain doesn't hear." He pulled away from the other, brought up that lashing right hand again. The thin man's head might have been an inflated rubber balloon on the end of a shaken reed.

"We call this the modern miracle, songbird. Something for nothing!"

The thin dark man was folding in the middle. He reeled, made a tortured retching sound, reeled again and clutched at the edge of the desk for support. "Please," he said thickly.

Gomez smiled, and faced Captain Hart's unbelieving eyes. He said almost gently, "The songbird wishes to sing." Then he turned to the thin man once more and snapped:

"José Ramírez! What is he?"

"I—I—Ramírez?"

"Tuhunga Road. Apartment building. Quick!"

"Sí, sí!" The thin man's eyes were terror-filled. He had his curled, shaking fingers at his breast. "Sí, José Ramírez."

"No police record."

The thin dark man jerked his head up and down. "I know. José. I see him in the café sometimes, not often. He—he's got a wife—"

"We've met. Him, not her!"

The thin man looked anxious. "In the café. Sometimes he's with Sanders. I—that's all I know. Honest to God, I—"

GOMEZ blinked. "Sanders?" He said the name, tasted it. "Sanders. Big Willie Sanders?"

The thin man nodded.

"Very well. Sit down." Gomez turned once more to Captain Hart. "This man cooperates. You heard? Big Willie Sanders."

Before Hart could reply, Gomez went to a bank of metal filing cabinets set against the far wall. He pulled out a drawer, took out a folder. He brought it over, laid it on Hart's desk. "Sanders," he said softly. "Twice. Suspicion of murder both times. But nothing. But a record. Ten to fifteen at Nevada State. Grand larceny. Probably more, but this I remember without looking."

Captain Hart was breathing through his mouth. "Boy," he said finally, "this wouldn't be third degree?" Gomez raised an eyebrow, and Hart continued, "I don't like it, Gomez. You never learned anything like this from me personally. I just want you to know that before I ask for your badge."

There was a silence then between the two men; and a silence in the room that nearly matched it. Only the faint whirr from the electric clock, the fretting, occasional rasps from the loudspeaker, plus the tortured breathing of a small thin dark man, disturbed the silence.

Finally Gomez said, "Very well. But one thing first. This Sanders. I want somebody sent out to pick him up. That's all, just this one thing."

"Just this one thing," repeated Hart. "I'll be damned!"

"There was a bank robbery," Gomez

went on quietly. "Our boys shot down a bystander. You were the one told me."

"Holy hell!"

"Sanders, Captain. I don't have the proof of it in my hands to show you, but it was Sanders. It was Sanders who walked in that bank, stuck up the teller, took out a sack full of money, and I want him brought in. This I'm asking."

More silence, a little constrained, a little shocked, until Hart said at last:

"Okay. I'll pass the word down the hall. But, Gomez—" a strange light came into Hart's eyes—"this doesn't change the other."

Gomez didn't answer that. He nodded, started to cross the office again toward the thin dark man in the chair.

But the thin man said quickly, "At 6507 Hidalgo Place. Third floor. Room in back . . ."

THE big electric clock up on the wall indicated four-thirty. It didn't seem like four thirty, but time passes quickly. The thin dark man was gone now, and the office held only Detective-lieutenant Sammy Gomez and Captain Hart.

The reproach in Captain Hart's eyes was puzzled, unspoken. The loudspeaker on the wall rasped now and then, now and then blatted with a familiar mechanical sound. The clock wisped.

The door of homicide suddenly banged back, and a red-faced man, a man whose gray shirt showed dark perspiration stains under his armpits, stuck his head in, said loudly, jeeringly:

"Hey, whaddya know! First thing, if we don't watch it, you homicide guys'll be running the whole shebang. We go up there to that place on Hidalgo like you said and bingo! Sanders there big as life. Or was, till we hadda go to work on him a little."

Gomez flicked a look at Captain Hart. He put his teeth together.

"Hell!" The red-faced man laughed. "Where d'ya think he snuck the bank sack with the dough in it? You'll never guess, so I'll tell you. Under the bed. Every cent. He didn't have a chance to spend any of it, not even for aspirin which he'll be needing about now."

Gomez nodded. "He talked?"

[Turn page]

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That made the red-faced man laugh again. "You must be psychic. Anyway, thought you'd like to know."

Gomez watched the door close again. Then he got up, came across the office. In his right hand he held a golden colored shield. He laid this on Hart's desk.

"A moment, if you would, Captain," he said. "It was not right, don't you see. When you told me the dying man had said that one word Immanuel, I mean. It didn't make sense."

He stopped, looked down at Hart. Hart didn't answer. He went on:

"I appreciate the way you felt. It was good of you. You didn't know, of course, for the thing was a colloquialism after all. Just one of those things."

Hart said then, "I'll listen, boy, if there's something you're trying to say."

"There is. I mean about this Immanuel thing. But not Immanuel, not possibly, don't you see, for it wasn't English the dying man was speaking."

Hart's eyes batted.

"Spanish, Captain. Something entirely different. Not Immanuel, but *y Manuel*." Gomez smiled, his eyes on Hart's. "A colloquialism. A local saying, as it were. Not exactly slang, but peculiar to some region. *Y Manuel*."

"*E Manuel*?" Hart was frowning.

"Yes. It sounds like the other, of course. *Y* is Spanish for the word 'and,' and Manuel is a name. But put together in this sense it doesn't just mean 'and Manuel!'" Gomez hunted a moment for words, then went on.

"Like confronting a thief and accusing him and having him protest that he had a partner in on the theft, that he himself wasn't the only guilty one. Literally, 'but not I alone, there was also Manuel. Catch him, punish him, too.' As you might speak, in English, of some 'Joe'—who could be anybody. Am I making myself clear?"

HART took a deep breath. "All right, boy. You can't expect me to understand that lingo, but all right, I'll take your word for it. In other words, you mean when the guy was dying, he figured we knew. He was telling us there was some other Joe in on the bank job,

that it wasn't just him alone?"

"Precisely. Sanders went into the bank, did the actual work. Ramirez was the lookout on the outside. Instead of staying in the car he got out, stood near the door of the bank. It happened quickly. Sanders came out running. He dove for the car. At the same instant, our men began to fire. One of the bullets got Ramirez. But he wasn't a spectator, as you thought. He figured the police knew. So—y' Manuel."

Hart sighed. "All right, boy. Put the badge back on, will you? It seems to me police work gets tougher and tougher every day. Now back when I was your age, it was easier. Back when I was your age I—" He stopped. "What the hell's wrong?"

"Nothing. Go on."

"Just that back when I was your age, a guy in homicide didn't have to speak foreign languages, he got along fine and dandy on just English alone."

Gomez' smile turned to a grin. "Back when you were my age, Captain," he said rather gently, "you had to speak Indian."

• • •

THE CRYPTOGRAM CORNER

(Answers to cryptograms on page 29)

A Limerick for Beginners

The Reverend Henry Ward Beecher
Called a hen a most elegant creature
The hen, pleased with that,
Laid an egg in his hat,
And thus did the hen reward Beecher!

The one-letter word "a" made this an easy problem to start with. The word "the" used three times, plus the fact that the end-letter "e" was the most frequent letter used, also helped. This bit of verse, incidentally, is a classic by Oliver Wendell Holmes.

A Motto for 1952

Now is the time for all good men to rally to the support of their party.

"J" used doubly was a good clue that it was "on." The pattern of FRC and the frequency of C, suggesting that it was "e," made it apparent the word was "the." That FRCDZ was "their," that DX was "is," and that FJ was "to," now followed in rapid succession. Since TT was not likely a vowel, K had to be one. At this point "a" was about the only remaining unknown vowel we had, and it wasn't hard to guess the word was "all." The rest was easy.

This crypt was by Thomas R. Fisher.

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V.M.B., Cleveland, Ohio, writes: "We're both in good health, have been members of another association for a long time, but with the higher cost of everything, one Policy isn't adequate protection. That is the reason we're buying additional North American protection. The other Policy pays direct to the Hospital, so any benefits from your Policy will be paid to policyholder."

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